

Ai No Kusabi *The Space Between*

Rieko Yoshihara

Vol. 6

METAMORPHOSE



Yaoi  Novel

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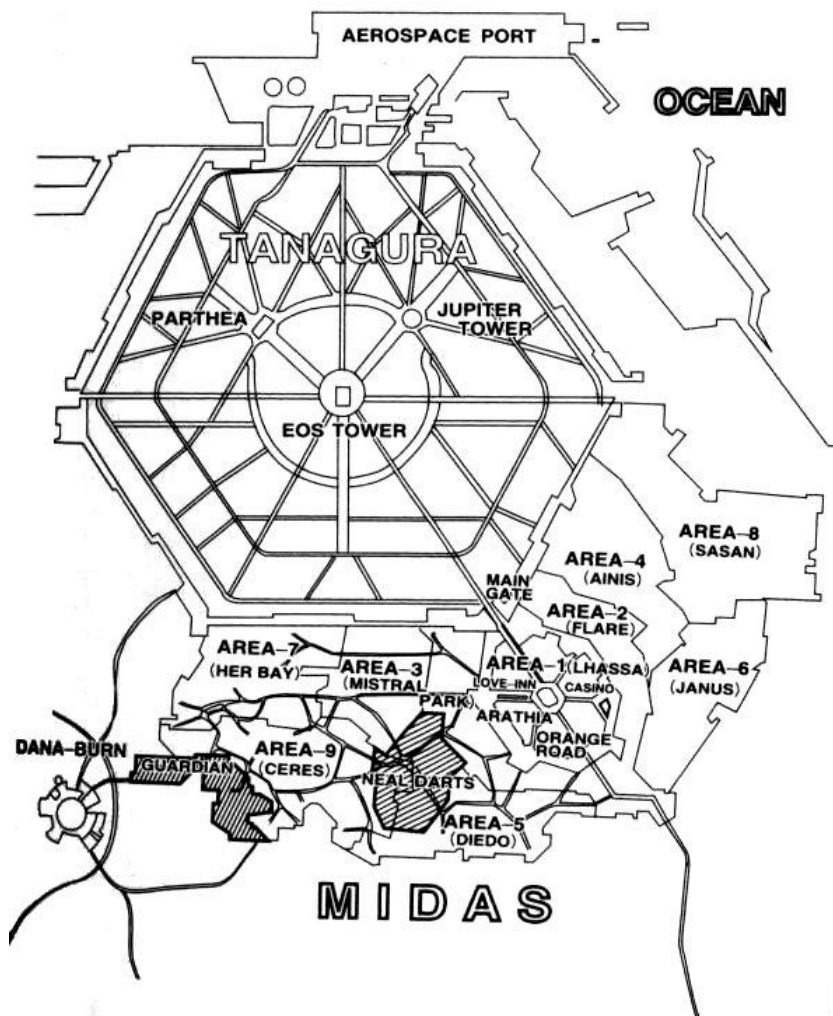


Ai No Kusabi

The Space Between

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Prologue

Midas. Area 4 (Ainis).

The large, domed arboretum showed off what Tanagura's vaunted biotechnology industry could accomplish given free reign. Every section of the park sported a variety of trees and brightly colored flowers. A rich variety of butterflies and insects and birds fluttered about carelessly. Soft breezes wafting from the negative ion generators bathed the skin. Taking a single breath of the refreshing air soaked deep into the flesh. It was a garden of paradise.

The nightless city of Midas had more to offer the visitor than the uninterrupted glow of garish neon that emanated from the Pleasure Quarters. Key among its many enterprises was this refuge where the exhausted party animal could pause and raise his spent spirits.

It was late in the afternoon. Iason and Katze strolled down one of the many flowered paths winding through the park. The two looked like a couple of businessmen taking a breather, escaping the hustle and bustle of the day in this tranquil setting. Except that one of them suggested something quite apart from the ordinary.

Though Iason's shades covered half of his face, they did nothing to diminish the impact of a beautiful face haloed by shining, golden hair. His body was designed as if to the artist's golden mean, and he was clothed in a deceptively simple uniform that represented the highest fashion of the elite. The combination entranced the eyes to a painful extent. The sense of Iason's presence was so overpowering that it turned the scarred face of Katze—who followed closely beside Iason like a shadow—into an afterthought.

The too-powerful pull of the sight was mesmerizing. Passers-by felt compelled to stop and stare and take a breath and exclaim: A *Tanagura Blondy!*

Such statements were accompanied by more than simple shades of longing. Still, nobody attempted to impede the refined gait of Iason and Katze as they wandered through the park. They were impervious to the whispered voices that erupted in their wake.

"So you still haven't tracked down Kirie?" Iason asked.

Katze could detect better than anyone the slightest change in degree of Iason's voice, a change that could lend a single word. But, as always, the tone of Iason's voice was low and calm as a summer morning.

"I'm sorry," Katze apologized. And then added, concisely summing up what he knew, "We've thoroughly searched every place he's likely to be. The crew he runs doesn't know anything."

"Then the incursion by the Midas Division of Public Safety was fruitless?"

"Not necessarily. Crossing the border limits the number of places Kirie can hide. Thanks to him, the idea of slum extraterritoriality has been proven false. After this, we can allow additional deterrents deployed against the mongrels, along with more effective propaganda campaigns from Midas."

Katze spoke plainly and without prevarication. He harbored no sentimental feelings toward his own home. He had roots in Guardian and Ceres, but at the age of thirteen, he'd been rendered a eunuch and installed as "furniture" in Eos. He hadn't only lost his ability to reproduce, but his ability to empathize with the fragility of human emotions. Even a sense of nostalgia was foreign to him. He knew too well that Guardian was just a polluted paradise.

Instead of rotting away in the fetid bird cage of the slums, Katze had neutered his emotions and become a perfect Eos appliance, ultimately destined to be cast out, rusting unused with the rest of the scrap. Katze's fate was to turn that on its head and retire from the black market as Iason Mink's faithful dog.

Katze had committed the most lethal act of betrayal furniture could, and yet he'd been granted clemency according to the whims of his

owner. This was in spite of the advice from Iason's colleagues, who viewed life through the lens of a strict meritocracy. They considered Iason's actions equivalent to digging through the trash.

Calling it "good luck" wasn't accurate, though. It was the great wheel of fate turning, and that was where it had deposited Katze. Given the situation he found himself in, Katze was intellectually well-equipped to analyze all the data coming out of the slums and grasp the very essence of its reality. But moving chess pieces around the board was not enough.

The stifling, stagnant slum was a perverted slag heap of the male sex. Common sense and common values did not operate. Unnatural risks were taken as a matter of course. Lacking experience on the ground, what the head could comprehend ultimately added up to nothing more than empty theorizing.

When Riki had become a courier under Katze's tutelage, that raw truth had been forced into Katze's brain. He'd come to understand the nature and character of the slum mongrels that he had never experienced in the flesh.

Though that may have been the only value of Riki's existence, Riki shook Katze's whole identity—for good and bad, beyond all expectations, penetrating to the emotions hibernating in his soul. Though it was different from the way Iason had attached himself to Riki, Katze couldn't hope to extricate himself from this accursed Möbius strip.

If only Katze had made a different choice back then. Somehow things would have turned out differently. five years later and it still throbbed, like an open wound. And if he had, probably—*surely*—

The thoughts spun around in his head in an endless loop, never finding purchase. Those feelings should have been eradicated long ago. And yet—Katze remained untroubled about tracking down Kirie.

"In other words, better that attention be drawn to these entanglements with Midas than to some clumsily leaked goings-on at Guardian," Iason said.

Despite the irony, Katze sensed no disagreement on Iason's part. Though it wasn't actual praise, this was as close as Iason came to expressing his feelings.

"An incursion by the Midas security guards ratcheted up the impact even more than if it had been the Ceres police."

What Kirie had seen at Guardian could change everything in Ceres. But if they could stoke enough hatred in the slums and make Kirie the scapegoat, then the mongrels would rush to deliver Kirie into their hands.

Approached by someone in possession of the information Kirie had, there were people who'd take the risk and provide Kirie safe passage. But concoct an excuse for the Midas Darkmen to start invading the slums, and the mongrels would give any wanted man a wide berth.

Taking into consideration what was most likely to tip the balance of power between Midas and Ceres, it was the best strategy.

In the slums, the envy felt toward the "winners" went beyond ordinary jealousy. Those who strove to get ahead, got rejected, and then slunk back to the slums were the pitiful "Cockers." But Riki, the heretic in their midst, had rejected the title. Riki was more than just another "beaten dog."

"You've summed up the situation nicely, but these deterrents won't add up to much if they don't deliver us Kirie," Iason said.

At some point, running from cover to cover, Kirie's luck would run out. The potential squealers would weigh the plusses and minuses. There was no denying the power of fresh information, but sometimes the ability to put lives in the balance proved the winning trump card. No matter how highly a *nouveau riche* upstart thought of himself, he wouldn't amount to much if he couldn't factor those variables into the equation.

In this case, though, they were talking about a stupid brat with no sense. If Kirie didn't seek out a buyer for his information, then he'd have no defense. As far as Katze could tell, only luck had kept Kirie

out of trouble for so long. Kirie was an amateur who didn't know what he had to be scared of.

"Nothing in the old mines at Dana-Burn?" Iason asked.

"Off-limits to residents of the slums. Unless Kirie was in a suicidal mood, he wouldn't go there."

"I was wondering if the internal security systems from back when Ceres declared independence were still operational."

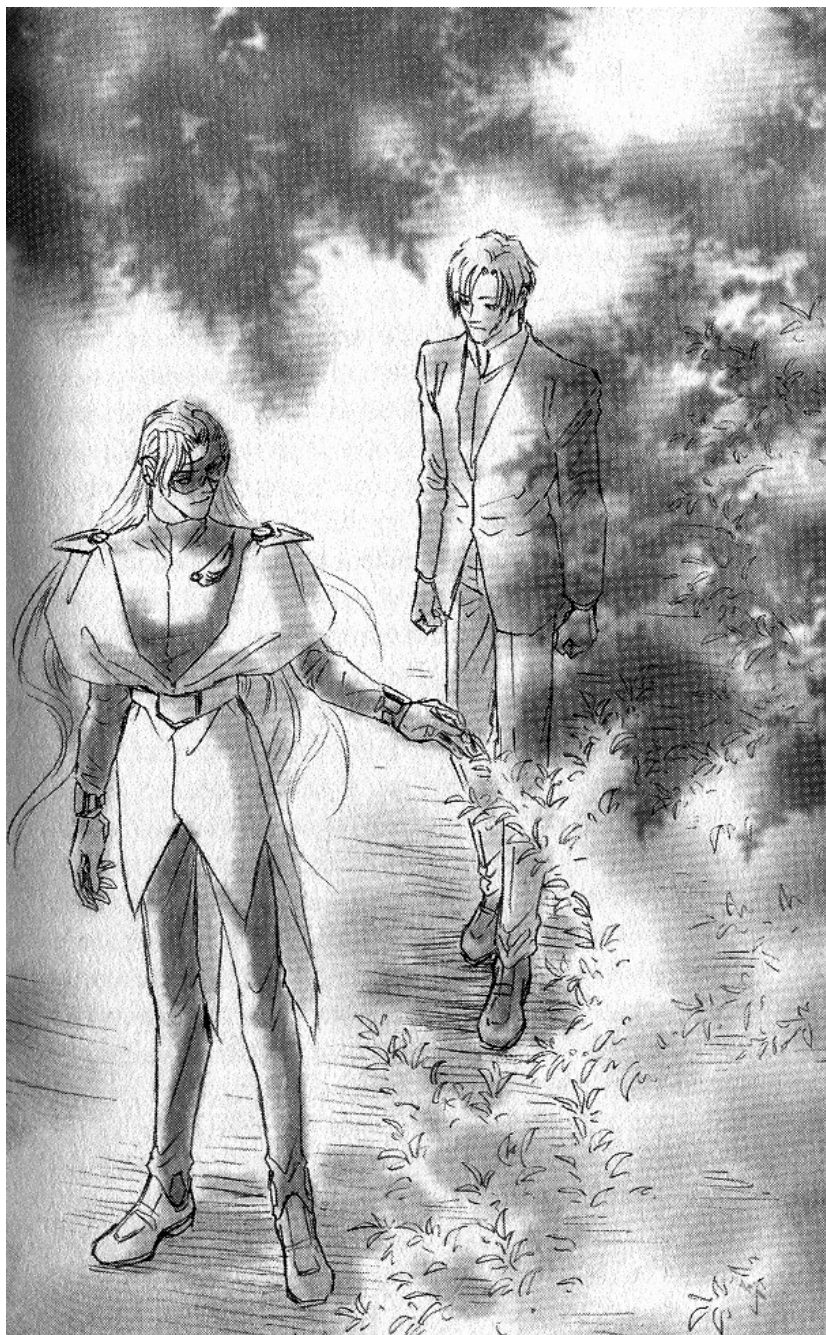
Dana-Burn had once been a sanctuary to those "resisting" Midas. Now it was a forgotten artifact. It'd grown too big and soaked up too much capital to simply sell for scrap. So it sat there, neglected. The blueprints had been lost long ago, so it became a labyrinth from which none who entered escaped alive.

"Besides Bison, who else could Kirie turn to?" Iason asked.

"Nobody I'm familiar with."

"Lovers? Friends?"

"He *was* fond of boasting how he only had the best." Iason's mouth tightened into a wry smile.



"Kuger's kid?"

"Indeed."

"Well, at least he aimed high," Iason said nonchalantly.

The first time Katze had heard about it, the revelation had hit him hard, leaving him speechless. The "special" child who'd never stepped outside that corrupt Eden—the sheltered son of those who held the keys to the Guardian hegemony—an orchid nurtured in a greenhouse.

The scion of the Kuger Clan believed that everybody should, by nature, bow down to him. The pitiful product of his own hubris, Manon was an empty shell but with pride to spare, and he'd fallen under Kirie's spell.

Katze was amazed. He'd thought it was a joke at first. How had Kirie pulled it off? Whispered sweet nothings in Manon's ears? Offered Manon his body? Katze couldn't wrap his mind around the affair. What did Kirie have to bargain with? What bewitching powers did he possess?

The more Katze pondered this question, the more he had to conclude that Manon was stupider than he'd thought. The human animal was a mysterious creature that defied logic and common sense.

"It's hard to believe that Kirie had so much power over Manon, to get him down into the depths of Guardian," Katze said.

Hard to believe. And if Katze thought so, the news must have hit Guardian even harder.

"More than the gaping holes in security being revealed, their crisis management abilities were shown to be lacking," Katze went on.

Despite the overwhelming outside influence of Tanagura, Guardian had no competition, no natural enemies. Perhaps that was the sum of the problem.

"The blood is stagnating, you think?" Iason asked. "Perhaps Guardian's hegemony needs an infusion of new blood."

Katze couldn't discern from Iason's tone of voice what other meanings he might be getting at. He did know that this incident scared the representatives of the clan that led Guardian. The feared Blondy who ran the black market hated incompetence and carelessness. The situation wasn't the result of an innocent mistake, but the product of pure mismanagement. Tanagura could not kindly overlook it.

For purposes of public consumption, Ceres was designated a special autonomous region independent of Midas, expunged from the official maps. It being in fact nothing more than a giant bioengineering farm, there was no way a Blondy could get openly involved. For

that reason, it made sense to entrust Katze as the liaison between the two parties.

"What's become of the Kuger boy?" Iason asked.

"A shock like that would generate the highest degree of alienation. All the psychotherapy in the world isn't likely to restore his mind," Katze said, remembering how Manon had slandered him to his face.

"As one would expect, an orchid grown in a greenhouse is a fragile thing," Iason said, but who was he thinking of when he expressed his feelings so plainly? Katze didn't have to ask. "So what does Kuger have to say?"

"He is sorry that Manon was not properly supervised. But whatever punishment is handed down, the secret is already loose."

Perhaps taken aback by the sudden clarity of the otherwise hesitant Katze's unusually clipped reply, Iason stopped and looked at him.

"What's this? Something else on your mind?"

"No. Just that the head of Guardian seems more concerned about the state of his son than the gravity of the situation he finds himself in."

"Do you doubt that if his son had screwed up sufficiently to take down the entire clan, Kuger would love him just the same?"

For a moment, Katze's eyes opened wide. He had the feeling he was hearing Iason say something he'd never heard before or would again. A second later he wasn't even sure he'd heard it at all.

Iason raised an eyebrow. "You find that strange?"

"What?"

"My use of the word *love*."

"Well—not really—" the flustered Katze stammered. His heart pounded in his chest.

But despite that—

"So Kirie wasn't paired up with anybody but the Kuger boy?" Iason's unflappable voice snapped Katze back to reality.

"No," Katze said, a touch of hoarseness at the back of his throat. He clucked to himself. This was no time to drift off. He rebuked himself and stiffened his resolve.

"I guess Kirie's ambitions mean more to him than sex?" Iason asked.

"I suspect he sees it mostly as a means to an end."

Katze couldn't speak for someone as clueless as Manon, but he couldn't imagine a social climber like Kirie actually forming romantic attachments.

"But even possessed of such blind ambition, there are walls that cannot be surmounted," Katze said.

"You mean Riki?"

Rather than nod, Katze fell silent. He'd defer everything about Riki to Iason. Though Riki and Kirie didn't share anything in common, the simple truth was that the only person it all revolved around was Iason. And this turn of events surely had caught Katze by surprise as well.

"To get ahead in the world, Kirie would sell his pride without

hesitation. Riki would sooner throw himself in the gutter than do the same. That difference amounts to an insurmountable wall," Iason said.

A counterfeit of the real thing.

In the end, the imitation had not bested the original. That summed everything up into the expected outcome. Or perhaps it had been a mistake all along to speak of Riki and Kirie in the same breath.

Kirie had believed that given the same once-in-a-lifetime chance as Riki, he would come out on top. But Riki had paid his dues and earned his scars. That was a completely different proposition than Kirie simply taking the bait dangling ill front of his eyes.

Getting ahead in the world.

Katze doubted that Kirie could begin to imagine the true meaning of "being prepared".

"Master Iason—"

"What?"

"Did you know that the Midas Police Center accessed Riki's records using a priority access code?"

"I know."

"But they could uncover Riki's pet registration and the fact that he was released back into the slums."

"Not a concern," Iason replied brusquely. "He's a slum mongrel. Pet Law applies only to Midas-registered serial numbers. Specialized breeds are exempt."

Under normal circumstances, a person looking for loopholes in the law and forcing square logic through round holes would be considered crazy. Katze had observed Iason play this "exception" card so often that he could only watch and sigh.

"Besides, all the records the MPC accessed have been deleted."

Meaning, the MPC had figured out that the special code indicated Riki's owner as a Blondy. No matter how feared the Darkmen were in Midas, they knew that there were people even higher up that they had to answer to.

In the entire galaxy, only a slum mongrel could be so stunningly ignorant as to underestimate the power and authority of the Tanagura elite. As a citizen of a perverted world cut off from the rest of existence, Riki could look Iason in the eye without fear.

At that moment, Iason slightly raised his gaze. "I take it they had a good time with him."

Katze saw Iason was looking in the direction of the earlier captivity and agreed that the Darkmen very probably had. Iason was a Blondy, standing at the very pinnacle of power in Tanagura. If the fancy struck him, his eyes could see anywhere he wished in real time.

"Because he's just a slum mongrel," Katze said.

That's what happened to a slum mongrel when the Darkmen got their hands on one. A slum mongrel who strayed into their territory was nothing more than a cockroach. Nobody needed permission to crush one underfoot.

Even the Human Rights Commission of the Galactic Commonwealth had nothing to say about the non-existence of Ceres. All their genteel thoughts and high-minded philosophies caved before the awesome power of Tanagura. That was the truth of the world.

When the Darkmen had been unleashed, Katze figured that Iason had tacitly approved of the inevitability of such an outcome. But Iason's anger at people taking his property for granted won out over cool logic.

Katze hadn't anticipated that the Darkmen would go so far as to transport Riki from the slums to the MPC. That they would access his personal data was another unexpected—and unforeseen—development.

The Darkmen's mission was to track down and apprehend Kirie, not drag his crew off to headquarters and interrogate them. But when it came to slum mongrels, they didn't have to worry about following the law. All they had to do was threaten and intimidate until someone talked.

And yet, Riki had ended up at the MPC. *Why?* The rest of the gang had been given the third degree on the spot. The Darkmen hadn't bothered to take *them* to the station.

The kids from the slums cruised the Midas nights to get away from the stifling, oppressive atmosphere of Ceres and blow off some steam. They'd mug a few tourists and pawn the pilfered plastic—but all told, it didn't amount to much. It was pocket change for drugs and alcohol. That was life in the slums.

The mongrels were insects, and so they were exterminated. Bugs to be swatted—that was the depth of the impression they left on the Midas Division of Public Safety. There was no need to go digging through personal files. It wasn't worth the time or bother.

In the slums, it was widely believed that when a mongrel fucked up and got nabbed by the Darkmen, his name went on a blacklist. The truth was, the Darkmen didn't bother with that, either. They had a little fun, gave them a working over, and tossed them out with the trash. Nobody asked for reasons, nobody offered excuses. Garbage didn't need it.

But Riki alone was different.

Katze didn't have to try hard to imagine what kind of treatment he'd received at the MPC.

A tone of voice betraying a brazenness just shy of arrogance—black-eyed insolence unwilling to curry favor with anyone—Katze understood how a man could fall headlong into the pit of his own making without realizing it.

Riki the Black. The destroying angel—how true the moniker was. That was the easiest thing to understand about Riki. For good or evil, there was *something* inside Riki that excited other men. He was

a mysterious beast and they couldn't resist reaching out to stroke his mane.

Iason had. And so had Katze. They scratched that itch in different ways and for different reasons, and the implications were entirely different. Kirie had felt that impulse as well, felt it so strongly that he completely veered off-track.

If Riki knew that such things were being said about him behind his back, he'd no doubt fly into a white-hot rage. There was something else inside him as well that simply couldn't take it all with a smile and a shake of the head.

In a way, the hardened pride of the Darkmen would have made Riki the perfect toy to play with, a trophy to hang on the wall. But after they'd had their way with him, learning that he was a Blondy's pet must have drained the blood from their faces.

A slum mongrel being a pet was staggering beyond belief. No less than its owner being a Blondy. But the reality stared them in the face.

Without tying up all questions, Riki's records were expunged from the databases, not out of concern for the Tanagura elite, but from fear of the powerful Blondy.

They were well into the red zone on the crisis management dial. There were places in this world that a sensible person did not go, questions he didn't ask without first knowing the answers. The decision of the Darkmen chief was final, the frustrations of any individual team member notwithstanding.

"So how shall we proceed?" Katze asked.

"How, indeed?" Iason paused, and then delivered his orders in his typically unflappable tones. "Look deeper, turn over more stones. That kid might have allies in the police holding their tongues and biding their time."

"Any opinions about what methods shall be deemed appropriate?"

For the time being, it was better to be safe than sorry. Katze wanted

to be sure he and Iason were on the same page. Though they always were.

"I'll leave that up to you. Only make sure I get that information, no matter how trivial it might seem to you."

Iason's calm and collected countenance betrayed no hesitation. His extraordinary attachment to Riki was undeniable, and yet he spoke in such a manner as to completely separate his public and private lives—the voice of the emperor of the black market, suffused with dignity and authority.

"I understand," Katze said and bowed deeply. He would do what had to be done, whatever that required.

Chapter 1

It was late at night, three days since Kirie had broken into Riki's apartment and set up house. The shocking predicament had been dumped in Riki's lap and the storm of confusion and indignation still hadn't settled.

Riki had been accosted by the Midas Division of Public Safety and taken to their headquarters. That was the first sign that Kirie had been up to something. Thanks to Kirie, and some crossed wires, he and Bison had been force-fed the ugly consequences of whatever games Kirie had been up to.

Riki had been raked over the coals for information he didn't have. He'd been tortured for nothing until finally, his pet status had been revealed. As far as Riki was concerned, that was the last straw, only adding insult to his already searing injury.

With the stuffing knocked out of him, he'd barely managed to make it home. That was when he discovered that the cause of all his troubles had been hiding in his closet the whole time. Riki felt like the butt of the worst practical joke in history.

What the fuck? The scene unfolding before his eyes had been so unbelievable, he'd practically forgotten to breathe. A seething hatred boiled in his brain.

"Don't you go feeling all sorry for him," he'd told Guy.

"He's a time bomb. We can't just leave him lying around."

"Then we kick his sorry ass out of here," Riki had stated flatly. But when the scalding fury faded and the two of them were left alone, he couldn't bring himself to throw Kirie out the door. It left him feeling pissed with himself.

After that, Kirie stayed in the closet, curled up in a shivering ball. But it wasn't because he feared facing Riki and getting yelled at or tossed out. It was only in that dark, narrow place that he could define the boundaries of his world, so he shut himself away.

Despite his hunger, Kirie barely ate, surviving on mineral water and a few scraps of food. It was not due to a lack of appetite. Rather, his body seemed incapable of handling food. He consumed the bare minimum to keep from starving to death.

Riki had no idea what Kirie had gone through. Whatever it was, Kirie would only say over and over, "I don't want to die." His tenacious grip on existence was fierce.

"Yeah, so you love life."

Regardless of whatever empathy Riki had for the sentiment, looking at Kirie's haggard form—his briefest respites were haunted by nightmares—Riki couldn't give a damn about hauling Kirie out of the closet.

I'm such a pushover, he thought with clenched teeth. The realization was harsh.

Kirie would do anything to get ahead. No need to dress up the truth in fancy clothes. The kid would use and abuse whatever he had on hand, sell out his friends and his conscience, tell any lie to get the upper hand, kiss anybody's ass.

"The ends justify the means," he'd claimed, and was proud of it.

He'd faked his way through life with a swagger he'd never earned, and his ego on full display. Now a mere shadow of what he used to be, he didn't deserve anybody's sympathy.

A deep and unbridgeable divide had opened up between Kirie and Riki. It should have been obvious at a glance, but right at the bitter end, Kirie had tossed his verbal hand grenade into the mix.

"I love you," he'd said, repeating himself like a creature possessed.

What the hell did he think he was doing, blabbering on so mindlessly? All at once, listening to Kirie running off at the mouth, Riki lost track of where the kid was coming from. The Darkmen had kicked the shit out of him, and the end result of that grief was this stupid farce? The thought made Riki steaming mad.

"If you're going to hate me no matter what, then I'll make you hate me worse than all the rest!" Kirie had said. He'd sold out Guy to Iason just for spite and personal enmity. He'd imagined how Riki would react when he found out, and wanted to see the fallout in person.

"Being hated from the heart is a thousand times better than being ignored. That way, I'd never be far from your thoughts. It's a feeling like nothing else in the world. It beats having sex with anybody."

If Kirie would go that far, then he'd really gone over the edge. A fool who'd cause so much trouble and still expect people to care about him had to be crazy.

Riki didn't think that Kirie was feeling anything connected to "love." Just some twisted sense of attachment that had mutated into what he took for affection. Otherwise, he was rationalizing his inexplicable, physical impulses using the word "love."

Why?

Because he had no place else to go. With the Midas Division of Public Safety and the Ceres police hot on his tail, he was out of options. He'd reached a dead end.

Riki would prefer being told he was hated and despised. That he could comprehend, because he despised Kirie. He'd never tried to hide it. Being hated by Kirie didn't mean a thing, and it had certainly made his life easier up until now.

Kirie went on wailing about how he loved Riki, and didn't shut up even when Riki smacked him hard across the face.

Playing us for fools.

Kirie had spread the pain and thrown the mud, and now he was trying to call it all bygones by shouting the word "love." That was why Riki hated him, why he couldn't forgive him. Confronted by such disregard, it made him want to throw up, or maybe pound Kirie's face in.

And still, Riki couldn't throw Kirie out. It wasn't because Riki felt

sorry for Kirie. Rather, he had the feeling that if he threw Kirie out, Guy would take the brat in himself.

"That's why we have to think about how to get rid of him," Riki said.

Guy had deflected the more pressing of Riki's concerns, but Riki didn't want Guy getting any more involved, in any form. He didn't want *anybody* from Bison involved.

What had they gotten themselves beaten black and blue for? Riki would settle for just knowing the answer to that question. He had the right to know. Guy thought so, too, but as far as Riki saw things, that was way too dangerous ground to go hiking across.

No matter how insignificant the secret might be, becoming party to it would make Guy party to the crime as well, an accomplice after the fact. And that was a risk Riki wasn't willing to take.

Things were coming to a head. The Darkmen stormed into the slums in order to keep a brewing crisis under control. The differences between Riki and Guy in their appreciation of the facts were vast, as were the differences between Riki and Kirie, who had secrets locked up in his head.

Kirie wasn't the only one working against the clock. Hence the source of Riki's confusion—how to get rid of Kirie and where to draw the line.

The doorbell chimed. Riki's heart jumped. Being burdened with Kirie had rubbed his nerves raw. But then he saw the caller ID and relaxed. It was Guy. Riki unlocked the door and Guy stepped in, carrying suitcases in both hands.

"Where's Kirie?"

"What's this, all of a sudden?" Riki drew his lips into a sullen line.

"Food and a change of clothes," Guy answered with a crooked smile while he set the cases on the table. The food was all right, but the "change of clothes" made Riki cluck his tongue with concern.

"Don't go spending money you can't afford on that piece of trash, Guy."

"He's been wearing that underwear for at least three days," Guy observed with a forced cheerfulness. "It's gotta stink something awful."

With practiced familiarity, Guy stored the food packs in the refrigerator. Riki couldn't ignore the fact that Guy had brought back a lot of food.

"Getting ready for a siege?" Riki asked.

"There's no harm in being prepared." The implicit message being, *Kirie's not going anywhere*. "We've got to consider all the angles, right? You can't think on an empty stomach."

All the angles? What other angle was there? All that mattered was *when, where, and how* they were going to get rid of Kirie.

"At least we can spare a thought for tonight's dinner," Guy said, tossing a food pack onto the stove. Riki's stomach rumbled in reply.

"Hey, look at that, just in time." Guy gave a carefree smile, hooking Riki in easily. Riki could only sigh.

Just then, the doorbell rang again, as if deliberately timed to break the momentary calm. The caller ID was blank. This guest had come uninvited. An unexpected night visitor was always unwelcome in the slums. All the more so with the Darkmen incident just behind them. Kirie was still hiding out and the cops had not slackened in their dragnet.

Riki glanced at Guy. He said, his voice low, "Get in the back. Don't show your face or say a word."

"Got it." Guy nodded, unable to keep the tension entirely from his face.

Guy disappeared into the bedroom. Riki clicked on the intercom. He had to confirm the identity of the interloper while being careful not to say too much. But the face that appeared on the screen was the

last one he expected to see. In a sense, he was worse news than the police.

Katze?

The Midas Division of Public Safety. Kirie. Katze. How could he throw snake eyes three times in a row? Once was a possibility, twice if he was on a losing streak, but three times meant the dice were loaded.

Painful experience had taught Riki that *coincidences* were not to be taken lightly. Two incidences that at first appeared completely unrelated could combine to create a violent chemical reaction. It wasn't mere paranoia telling Riki that Kirie was the spark that could set off a chain reaction.

Riki swallowed hard despite himself. For a moment only, he considered playing it dumb. But right then, he knew he didn't have the balls to pull the wool over the eyes of Scarface, his old boss.

"What?" Riki asked, his voice unnaturally hoarse.

"Let me in," Katze said, staring into the camera lens. "We need to talk."

"Sorry. Try back tomorrow. I'm not in the mood."

That wasn't a lie. Staying under the same roof as Kirie was depressing enough. The sight of Katze at his front door made Riki sick to his stomach.

"This is an emergency. It won't take long."

Of course it was. Katze wouldn't have showed up otherwise, for reasons Riki preferred staying in the dark about. Moreover, Katze having business with him was good grounds for keeping Katze and the relatively clueless Guy from bumping heads. It was bad enough that Kirie had stubbornly ferreted out the connection between Katze and Riki. But worse that the kid wasn't exactly in his right mind. The messy details reaching Guy's ears would complicate matters even more.

Riki gritted his teeth. *I'm living the worst-case scenario here.* And Katze had arrived to tighten the screws.

"Open up," Katze demanded. He hadn't been in a good mood before, and his tone of voice had definitely cooled several degrees in the past minute.

Shit!

Unable to resolve the situation quickly, Riki threw caution to the wind and unlocked the door. At this point, he was left with no other option but to play the odds and take his chances, even if it meant betting the house with a crap hand.

Katze came through the door with steel in his eyes. The bruises on Riki's face didn't slow him a bit. Far from it, he cut right to the chase.

"I'm looking for Kirie."

For several long seconds, the force of Riki's beating heart practically ripped a hole through his rib cage. Certain that it must sound like a pounding drum to Katze, he bit down hard on his lower lip.

"You know anything about that?" Katze prodded.

"Hey, take a number and get in line. Everybody's asking me that question," Riki hissed, not bothering to hide his anger. "How the hell am I supposed to know where he is or what he's up to? The kid's a jinx. He's got nothing to do with us!"

No matter how emphatically he denied everything, nobody believed him. He knew Guy and Kirie were probably listening in with bated breath. With that on his mind, Riki wanted Katze out of there as quickly as possible. His gut felt like a tinderbox ready to burst into flame at any second. Besides, there was no knowing when the word "Iason" might pop out of Katze's mouth.

"The Midas Darkmen give you those bruises?"

"Nothing gets by you."

"If nothing got by me, then I wouldn't be coming here in the first place."

All the parties concerned had backed themselves into their respective corners and it was Katze's job to clean up the mess. Riki didn't have to ask on whose behalf he was working.

At the MPC headquarters, Riki had told them to use their own resources to find Kirie, rather than beat up him and his friends. He'd been boiling over with bitter bile and had dumped that scalding pot on the Darkmen's heads. But Katze coming to him like this was completely unexpected. Compared to the blundering Darkmen, Katze's approach was a thousand times more effective when it came to finding out what was going on in the slums.

So what was his next move? Riki racked his brain. He had to weigh every move carefully to keep himself from giving the game away. Except that his thoughts spun uselessly.

"When the pressure's on, people will inevitably retreat to familiar ground. Kirie's a mongrel and he doesn't have a regulation ID, so he has no place to go outside Ceres."

Had Katze been goading Riki on purpose, then Riki could give as good as he got. But a snappy comeback wouldn't shake the cold, hard truth. With every unnecessary word that came out of his mouth, he was digging his own grave, the one thing he wanted to avoid.

Kirie's biggest mistake was believing that he'd climbed more than a few short rungs up the social ladder in Ceres. Imagining himself a winner in the oppressive, claustrophobic slums was nothing but a delusion. He'd soared high, never distinguishing dreams from reality.

There was no cure for that kind of ignorance. The heaps of money Iason had given Kirie in exchange for Guy had clouded his brain. The only winners on this planet were those who could lay their hands on a legit ID and leave it behind.

Katze had never once labeled himself that kind of "winner."

"No matter how bad Kirie pretends to be, he's just a puppy," Katze said. "When a little shit like that finds himself boxed in, he's going to stick his face in the crotch of the most reliable bitch he can find and curl into a quivering ball."

Riki's heart jumped again. It was as if Katze could see right through the walls.

"And what does that have to do with me?" Riki asked.

"As far as Kirie is concerned, that's pretty much all Bison ever meant to him. Don't you think?"

"I think you're imagining things."

Riki took a deep breath and turned his thoughts inward. An answer like that wasn't going to dissuade Katze. With Katze involved, playing dumb and telling him to suit himself wasn't going to cut it.

Katze knew that the Darkmen didn't know all the particulars. Including all those things Riki didn't want to know. If Riki didn't want to get bystanders involved at his home ground, he would have to deal with Katze directly. How many rounds he could last was another question.

"Maybe Kirie's dead by now," Riki said.

"And why would you think that?"

"The Darkmen came storming across the borders, right? Waving their shock eyes around, delivering the pain just for the hell of it, turning over every stone to find Kirie. You're the one who said he's got no place else to go. But in that case, maybe you should consider other possibilities."

"Other possibilities?"

Iason had said that Katze was one slum mongrel who used all his brain cells. There were better uses for him than to be tossed into the laboratory of life and chewed to pieces. It wasn't the kind of thing Katze wanted to hear, but working for him as a courier in the black market had taught Riki just how right Iason was about Katze.

In the black market, a capable man was the one with the cool head. He had to be. When it came to a showdown of wills and wits with Katze, Riki had no hope of winning.

But Riki couldn't back down. There was no crossing that line in the sand. He wasn't doing this for Kirie's sake. There was something else he couldn't afford to lose.

"Would you really be that surprised if somebody was out to get him?" Riki asked.

Just considering all the possibilities. In the slums, it was hardly out of the question. Of course, all the better if he could get Katze to consider that possibility. Consider it and get the hell out. That was the sum of what Riki wanted from Katze.

"But don't you think a generous bounty would change the quality of the chatter?" Katze asked.

"A bounty?"

"Yes. If the current methods don't yield results, that's the direction things will turn."

"You must be joking."

The conversation had taken an ominous turn, which surprised Riki. Not only had Katze dodged the jab he'd thrown, but he had countered with an unexpected punch.

"Alive or dead, flash a little coin and all of the reliable information dealers will turn hunter. Don't you agree? Tracking down and handing over a man who brought so much trouble to the slums isn't going to trouble any of them."

Katze spoke without a hint of prevarication. Riki had no grounds to believe he was bluffing.

"And who's fronting this bounty?" Riki asked.

"The Ceres Security Services. Seems their honor is at stake."

"How so?"

Riki couldn't avoid the feeling that Katze had led him by the nose to this point like the most practiced of lawyers. But without any way to tell whether Katze was bluffing or not, Riki had no choice but to play along.

"If a tourist gets shaken down by a slum mongrel, that's the kind of complaint that can be resolved on an individual basis. But when a slum mongrel crashes an air car and gets the sightseers involved, well, that's different."

"When a mongrel does *what*?" This was news to Riki. Neither the Darkmen nor Kirie had breathed a word about it.

"A metallic silver Stella. Just the brand a brat like Kirie would go for. Plus, the VIN says it's a custom model. Hard to ignore a gaudy thing like that."

Now that Katze mentioned it—the air car Kirie had been driving when he ambushed Riki on the Orange Road was a brand new silver model. Kirie had proudly boasted of it as one of a kind.

"Add the cost of financial compensation to professional pride. No way they can let this slide."

So this was the reason the Midas Division of Public Safety was tracking down Kirie with a vengeance. The substance of this conversation was becoming more and more plausible. Except that it still couldn't account for Kirie's deranged state nor the visions that haunted him even in his sleep.

"You don't think that's sufficient reason for the Darkmen to violate the borders and charge into the slums?" Katze asked with a wry smile.

However used to Katze's cool poker face Riki was, Katze had taken it to a higher level. Exposed to a kind of beautiful maliciousness he'd never seen before, Riki gulped despite himself.

"So what are these special circumstances that brought you out of your safety zone and all the way here?" Riki asked.

Katze chuckled to himself. "You do beat all, Riki. How'd you turn out so damned smart?" The smile vanished just as quickly. "I still turn the question over in my mind. If I'd only been presented with a different set of options back then. That sort of thing. But that's just me spinning my mental wheels."

Katze spoke with an unexpected earnestness. *You're playing dirty, Katze*, Riki thought, angrily clenching his teeth. That was exactly the same question that haunted *his* thoughts as well. All the regrets about the past, though, couldn't change the present. The clock could not be unwound. What was done couldn't be undone.



For a split second, Riki and Katze looked into each other's eyes,

both dangling from the end of Iason's leash, licking their wounds together.

"Where's Kirie?" Katze asked.

"Couldn't say."

Like two beaten fighters staring each other down, unwilling to cry uncle, their mingled lines of sight hardened.

"Is that so? Then I guess this is all for naught."

For a moment Riki hoped Katze was throwing in the towel first. Only a moment.

"Then perhaps a little booster will loosen your tongue?"

Riki recoiled slightly and his eyes opened wide. "Booster? What's that?"

"A truth serum that prompts one to talk about whatever one doesn't want to talk about. In great detail."

Katze casually offered this information while extracting a case from his breast pocket. He made a performance of extracting from the case a small auto-hypodermic.

Riki took another step backward. "What the hell are you doing?" It hadn't occurred to him that Katze would come so prepared. When it came to raw, accumulated experience, Katze still held a few aces up the sleeve.

"The very latest, right out of the labs. Only stings a little, and then gets right to work. There's no need for the two of us to stand here and come to blows."

"What the fuck? I told you, I don't know where Kirie is!"

"Then think of this only as confirmation. If you really don't know, then you've got nothing to be frightened of. Come now, Riki."

Riki couldn't help but notice how much like Iason that direct

command sounded. He felt the gooseflesh rising on his arms. *The real reason that brought Katze here—*

In that moment, the reality that Riki couldn't confess what he didn't know—the maxim that one can't squeeze blood from a turnip—caused even Guy's existence to vanish from his thoughts.

"What *exactly* did Kirie do?" Riki asked with great deliberation, almost gasping out the words. "Why do you want to know so badly where he is?"

Katze's voice fell to a rough whisper. "The little upstart targeted the son of the Guardian administrator while struggling to the top."

"Guardian—?"

Riki couldn't tell whether everything Katze had said up until then was merely prelude or if this was just another tangent.

"It appears that the ingénue was seduced by Kirie's sexual wiles. Kirie stoked his desires like the predator who promises the child just one more sweet."

No shit? Riki couldn't believe his ears. He couldn't find the words.

"After one of their dates, they apparently went prowling around the restricted areas beneath Guardian. But a Minotaur was waiting down there in the catacombs for our young Theseus."

Riki felt like he'd gotten hit across the back of the head with a brick.

"Naturally, our two cubs were entirely unprepared to encounter something so frightening. The shock was too much for the boy and he lost his mind on the spot. Kirie, on the other hand, only lost his last meal on the floor before fleeing the premises."

Riki's thoughts flashed back to Guardian. The Minotaur in the basement that no human could look upon and live. Haruka. Junker. Robby. Schell. Their names and their faces flashed across his senses, pulling him back into the past.

It's so sad—scary—painful—

Riki, you're not going to abandon me, are you?

I lost Schell because of you. And you're the one living the good life. There's something wrong with the world, you think? Whatever I lost, you're gonna lose!

A reality too unreal to be real. A hidden menace.

I'll tell you what I know, Riki. Then you'll finish off the monster. Because you're the biggest and the strongest and the prettiest—

The undulating, swirling eddies of impulse. The pale blue warp of the plasma. The bewitching throbbing, responding to them standing there. And then the sensation of fingers tightening around his throat.

What had the Guardian administrator said to him then? *The power to see and not to perceive.*

Yes, he had the distinct recollection that such a conversation had taken place. Had Kirie seen what Riki hadn't perceived? And did Katze know what it was? Perhaps that *thing* wringing the screams from Kirie's lungs, grating on his nerves, attached like a leech to his soul.

These uninvited thoughts crossed Riki's mind, sending a shiver up his spine. Riki licked his lips, stiff as if exposed to a chill wind. "Once you find Kirie, then what?"

Katze curtly dodged the question. "My job is to find Kirie and hand him over to the proper authorities. Nothing more."

"So I suppose it'd be pointless asking you to give it a pass."

"I value my life and health as much as you."

That reply was enough to make Riki cognizant of Iason's presence, somewhere pulling the strings behind the scenes. That was why Katze had bided his time before coming to see Riki.

"Where is he?" Katze asked.

Riki bit his lip and cast his eyes briefly in the direction of the bedroom.

Katze gave him a surprised look. "I see. So that's what it comes down to."

Katze sighed and returned the hypodermic to the case. He nimbly manipulated the interface of his small, watch-sized mobile. A second later, the front door opened softly and two sturdy men entered the apartment.

Katze must have jimmied the door when he came in.

That son of a bitch really doesn't miss a trick, Riki thought.

Katze didn't say a word, but the men seemed to know exactly what was expected of them. Without a glance at Riki, they headed straight for the bedroom.

Game over. Checkmate.

The next moment, a scream: "*Bastards!* No! Let go of me!"

Guy's anger and Kirie's screams mingled together, followed by the violent sound of fists meeting flesh. Katze's heavies didn't say a word. That was the weirdest thing of all.

"Riki!" a desperate Guy cried out. "Riki!"

Involuntarily, Riki's eyes went to the bedroom door. Katze grabbed his arm. *Don't interfere,* he didn't have to say aloud.

Riki stared down at his feet and balled his hands into fists. Kirie bawled like a baby. Guy fumed. But Riki didn't move. He couldn't move.

The rage and anguish were suddenly extinguished. The men emerged from the bedroom. The first bore across his shoulders a large black bag that Riki hadn't noticed when they came in. Large enough to hold a small man. The second escorted Guy, his arms

pinned behind him.

The men hadn't even broken a sweat, though Guy was clearly exhausted. Whatever they did to Guy, the only evidence was the breaths that gasped from his lungs.

Katze looked at Guy and his eyes narrowed momentarily. That was his only reaction. He motioned with his eyes. The man released Guy and he fell back against the nearest wall, his whole body trembling.

"Sorry for the trouble," Katze apologized curtly, and then left without a backward glance. *I'll leave the rest to you to clean up*, was the rest of the unspoken message.

Riki tasted the bile at the back of his throat. That was Katze. Even after the man had disappeared from sight, Riki couldn't get the bitterness out of his mouth.

"What the—what the fuck—?" Guy wheezed, the fierce anger not far below the surface. "Why didn't you stop them?"

Guy's voice carried the sharp edge of reproof. Riki had betrayed them.

"Those guys are bad news. In a completely different league. It'd be useless trying to stand in Katze's way if he came all the way here."

Guy grabbed Riki's collar and wrenched hard. "This is all a big mistake!" The normally soft amber of his eyes was fiery red.

"How is it a mistake?"

"There were better ways—"

"What ways? That bastard was ready to use truth serum on us." And Riki had the distinct impression that Katze hadn't been bluffing. "What the hell do you think I should have done?" he spat out.

The mistaken one wasn't himself. It was Kirie. Kirie should have seen it coming a light year away, but Guy was turning all his rage on Riki instead. He was being completely irrational.

Guy bit his lip and stared at Riki. Clearly, Guy didn't get it. To him, Katze was just some good-looking man. He didn't know how frightening Katze could be. But that wasn't something Riki felt like explaining. If he started talking, he was scared he'd end up saying something he'd regret.

"A man wipes his own ass in the slums. Everybody knows that," Riki said.

"But that doesn't mean you had to kiss *that* guy's ass! Not you, Riki!"

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"So explain it to me!"

The conversation was quickly going places Riki didn't want it to.

"When did you turn into such a suck-up?" Guy asked, making Riki lose patience.

"These last three days, all I've been thinking about is how to get rid of that jinx!" It was the truth. Riki didn't want Kirie anywhere near Guy.

Riki went on, "Those guys turned up at the same time I was going to throw his ass out the door. So I let them carry out the trash. Same difference. What did I do wrong?" Nothing, except that he was covering up one sin by confessing to another. "Two birds, one stone. Job done."

The next instant, Riki's ears rang. His head jerked and his eyes blurred. The side of his face stung where Guy had hit him.

Ow—

Guy had never hit him before in anger. Knowing this made Riki's heart hurt.

"Look, even I know crawling your way out of the slums isn't all wine and roses," Guy said.

"That's right. You can't grab that brass ring without leaving

something else behind. I gave up Bison—I gave up *you*. Once I decided on that course, I resolved to sell whatever I had—including my pride—to get there. The end result is what you see. You always pay a price to get anywhere."

Kirie was paying that price now. And it wasn't a debt that anybody else could shoulder. Riki had paid his price as well. No, he was still paying it. He'd once believed that those three years had retired the bill, but Iason didn't play by the same accounting rules as everyone else.

"That's not what I'm talking about," Guy said. He still didn't get it. "I want to know why you just stood there and let it happen!"

"Because I hate Kirie's guts. I've been standing here holding my breath the whole fucking time he's been holed up in that closet!" The words tasted like acid on Riki's tongue. "No matter what, there was no good choice. You wanted us to lay our lives on the line for Kirie? There's no way he's worth it!"

But this was Guy—Guy, who'd feel sympathy for the devil. Not Riki. Not even if Guy told him to. Just because Guy could forgive the miserable disgrace didn't mean that Riki could overlook what he'd done.

"Forget Kirie, Guy. That's the best course of action," Riki said, though he knew he was just trying to soothe his own conscience. Guy knew it too.

"You think I can just forget seeing something like that?" Guy shot back.

There was no hiding the venom in his voice.

The dead of night.

The darkness covered the slums like a heavy blanket. Though the skies above Ceres—long ago erased from the official maps of Midas—were stained with the dim neon glow of the garish Pleasure Quarters, the vulgar boisterousness somehow never reached them.

Guy marched down the street after leaving Riki's apartment. "Shit, shit, *shit!*" he hissed to himself. If he didn't let off some steam, it would scald him from the inside.

How the hell did things come to this? How'd it come to blows?

Because Riki had been shooting off his mouth and it didn't make any sense. It was like Guy's arm had acted on its own. No, he wasn't pissed off at Riki because he wasn't making sense—it was because Guy couldn't hold in his anger any longer. This person had barged in uninvited, and Riki had caved without a fight, like some ordinary coward.

When had everything gone wrong?

Everybody knew Riki hated Kirie. But until the day before, Riki had never let the emotions show. He'd never made a point of it, even if that resulted in him getting sucker-punched by some unschooled punk.

Before tonight, Riki had been the same old Riki. What changed? *That bastard.* That man with the scar—Riki called him "Katze"—he showed up and Riki got weird.

Who was he?

Katze couldn't be an ordinary resident of the slums. Otherwise, there was no way he could know that much about the situation in Midas.

When Riki went up against Katze, he was on edge to an unusual degree. Guy wasn't just seeing things. He could tell from the tone of Riki's voice. But then, conversely, what hold did that slender, refined man—apparently a foreigner to any kind of violence—have that made Riki so cautious?

There was a surprising truth to the rumors about Katze. Though whatever truth was out there remained shrouded in hearsay and innuendo. Guy didn't know, either. What he'd overheard was so crazy it was hard to know what to believe. An air car crash, Guardian being involved somehow—

But regardless of Guy's ignorance, there was no denying that Kirie was in deep. While Guy listened, Kirie's already panicked expression had gone a few shades greener. Even Riki getting on his case hadn't spooked him like that. He must have had a few circles of hell left to go even then.

Because every time Katze opened his mouth, Kirie's mind went a few more feet over the edge. His body shook as if in a fever. If Guy hadn't held him down and stuffed a towel in his mouth, he would have been screaming his head off the whole time.

Are they serious? The words had emerged from Guy's mouth unbidden. Kirie had seduced the son of the Guardian administrator? *No joke?* Three days before, Kirie had confessed his love for Riki. Had that been a performance as well?

What was this "date" in the underground levels of Guardian? What was that all about? Another staggering revelation piled on another unexpected surprise. Guy had the feeling that this was way outside anything he could understand.

"I don't get it, Guy. This little shit would use anybody for anything, sell us all out if it served his purposes. I don't get what's going through your head right now?"

Riki's words had sawed at his heart. Guy should know damned well how evil Kirie could be. And yet he was covering for the brat.

An air car crash. Guardian. The administrator's son.

Beat an old carpet and the dust flew up. Beat on Kirie and he crumbled into a cloud of unfathomable mysteries. If Katze was telling the truth, Kirie had crossed into a land of no return. Except that Riki would know if it was the truth. Guardian seemed to be involved and that was why Riki had handed Kirie over without a fight.

Some monster was waiting down there in the subterranean darkness. *What monster?* The administrator's son had seen it and lost his mind. Kirie had been reduced to a quivering mass. *What the hell was it?* What secret was Guardian hiding? The thought brought

Guy's blood to a boil.

Riki wasn't talking. Or he *couldn't* talk, and had to keep that secret wrapped up inside. In that case, who was connecting the dots between a traffic accident in Midas and the inner workings at Guardian? More than the mysteries behind Kirie more than anything, that was the question Guy wanted an answer to.

You do beat all, Riki. Warm blood briefly ran through the cool tone of the man's voice. Guy wasn't hearing things. He'd felt it. *If I'd only been presented with a different set of options back then.* The echoes of a painful longing. What were those "options" Katze was thinking about?

Guy suddenly realized something.

The whole time Riki had referred to Katze using familiar pronouns. Not "sir," nor the man's name, except for once. And Katze in turn had used Riki's name, without hesitation.

It'd be useless trying to stand in Katze's way if he came all the way here. That was the only time Riki had said the man's name aloud. That "Scarface."

Who are you?

Right at the very end, Katze had spared Guy a single glance. From that brief, cold look, Guy knew that his existence was secondary. The man's eyes pierced him, arousing in him a disquieting turbulence.

I've never felt anything like it.

And it infuriated him. He could detect the man's intelligence in the way he addressed Riki, and a subtle, hidden intimacy. Katze and Riki shared a world Guy would never understand or be a part of and it made him jealous.

That man knows what happened to Riki those three years.

That suspicion burrowed into Guy's thoughts and wouldn't let go. The possibility that Katze knew what happened to Riki brought

Guy's emotions to a slow burn.

Riki couldn't sleep that night. Eyes closed or open, Guy's face hovered in his mind. Guy's tight, severe expression. The look of terror in Kirie's eyes. And Katze's perfectly calm face.

Riki turned over on the mattress, but he didn't feel drowsy. Bitter sighs escaped his lips. *Shit. What the hell am I doing, spending this much thought on a little fuck like Kirie?*

His brains had turned to mush. He couldn't think. There was only a thick sludge filling his skull.

It was raining again. The rain slanted in, driven sideways by the slashing, freezing wind, pounding unceasingly against the fallen walls and crumbling rubble, into the filthy alleyways.

Three days had passed since Katze took Kirie away. All that time, like some divine punishment, the rain had fallen on Riki, the heavens unburdening all their resentment.

He hadn't seen Guy. He'd phoned twice but didn't get through. Maybe it was just bad timing. Or Guy needed some time to cool off. Or he wasn't picking up on purpose.

The stiffness in Riki's neck and shoulders hadn't improved. It just got worse. But in any case, sooner or later the scores would have to be settled. That thought in mind, he was doing his best to bend his mind around the inevitability.

If he didn't, the alternative was too suffocating.

I supposed I'll be saying goodbye to this apartment of mine, too.

Everything had been packed up or disposed of. He turned about, taking in the place, and breathed a sigh of regret. It'd been a year and a half since he'd returned to the slums. He'd stretched his limbs and taken a deep breath, but those true feelings of freedom had

escaped him.

I'll take my time and— That was the dream that never materialized.

Why me? That was the question he tortured himself with.

He knew floundering about amounted to nothing. The cool grip of the pet ring around his cock made clear the unavoidable reality. After this, there'd be no place to run.

That time Iason had visited him, Riki had given in so easily. His pride, stubbornness, and reason had dissolved before the demands of his starving, pet-bred appetite. He had to come to terms with the fact that during those three years, his body had been thoroughly trained.

He'd been a fool to believe that returning to the slums meant he could just start over.

The sensations Iason had stoked in him coursed along his limbs and warmly mounted his spine, penetrating the depths of his brain. Logic and reason were useless. Excuses didn't matter. And each stimulation left him fiercely wanting more.

That frightening and avaricious creature had made itself at home inside him. After this, every time Iason held him, it would unleash those cries of joy. It would eventually devour his consciousness and swallow him entirely.

Momentarily consumed by the loathing he felt toward such a vision, Riki tightened his expression. *Idiot. What are you thinking?* But the realization that he couldn't bring himself to deny these thoughts shook him to the core.

The afternoon passed. The rain showed no signs of letting up. It was the winter of his twentieth year. Even after the heavy storms passed, the dawn would still be far away.

Chapter 2

Decorated in calm and beautifully utilitarian hues, Iason's office was uniformly devoid of any unnecessary extravagances.

At that moment, Iason was sitting in his executive chair, relaxed, his eyes focused on the market data scrolling past on the computer screen. Out of the corner of his eye he observed a flashing glow indicating an incoming personal call.

The corners of his mouth softened slightly. The signal came from the special phone he'd given Riki. The one embedded with a GPS tracking device.

He clicked on his video phone. Riki, though, was in voice-only mode.

"Yes?"

"I—"

"I assume things are settled on your end?"

"Ah—"

Their words overlapped. Neither bothered to identify himself.

"I see."

The display conjured up a map of Midas and pinpointed Riki's location.

"I'm sending a capsule car to your location. Don't go anywhere." Iason typed as he spoke, executing the commands.

"What's the cab number?"

"T-085."

No need to waste any breath. The line went dead.

Katze could understand a flock from a single bird, an intelligence that set him apart from his peers. Perhaps because of his five-year tenure as furniture and the deeply ingrained fear toward Iason imprinted in him, Katze's attitude of absolute submission had never lessened.

But a slum mongrel who didn't feel compelled to fawn, who said what was on his mind—even if it amounted to little more than stubbornness—was a precious item. That Iason had reached the point where he would condone such behavior was something of a miracle to him.

Well, Iason mused to himself, we had to go all the way around the block to get there, but we managed.

From the desk drawer, he extracted a slender, braided, platinum alloy chain attached to a leather collar. *Z-107M* was engraved on the metal. Four and a half years before, Iason had procured it for Riki.

Until he received an official pet ring at his coming-out party, a pet reared in Eos couldn't go anywhere without a collar. The security checkpoints relied on the pet ring instead of an ID. A pet lacking a ring was not recognized as a resident of the Eos community and couldn't step out of his room.

A pet with a collar attached would be instantly recognized as a newcomer, and any blunders or mistakes would be forgiven a pet wearing such a collar. It was an essential item for the new pet that gave him a little breathing space to get used to his new environment.

The typical expectation in Eos was that a pet would wear a collar no longer than two weeks or so. Half a *year*—as in the case of the senseless, shameless Riki—was a downright *disgrace*.

"The lowest sort of trash, vulgar, dirty, undisciplined—"

But really? Recalling his thoughts at the time, a wry smile creased Iason's lips. Riki's wild nature was evidence of his lack of imprinting. Calling him "dirty" was an excuse to get out of his way.

Those who called him the worst were only broadcasting their jealousy and fear.

Turning a slum mongrel into a pet was the biggest scandal to hit Eos society since its founding. Of course, in Iason's case, it was a willing crime of conscience.

"Iason, bringing that gutter rat into Eos will stain your reputation," Raoul had observed with evident bitterness.

In fact, life with Riki had been one crisis after another. Having become accustomed to a life where nothing interesting happened on a regular basis, Eos had suffered all the excitement from the daily scandals that it could stand.

Introducing a slum mongrel into a world where a pet was valued chiefly for the purity of its pedigree—and its shamelessness and submissiveness—was like tossing a wolf into a herd of sheep.

It'd been four and a half years. Iason had met Riki some time before claiming him, but after suffocating him in the oppressive licentiousness of Eos, he'd let Riki go for eighteen months. Being back in his old nest had refreshed Riki's intrepid spirit.

It also seemed that enduring an unexpected period of abstinence had left Riki's body in a state of craving, echoing Iason's hunger over their time apart. During that time in the slums, the old fire had returned to Riki's eyes. And all the while, the pet poison was soaking into every fiber of his body.

Yes, that must be it.

"And what turbulence will we be heading into this time?" Iason asked himself as he played with the leash. "It should be quite a ride."

Riki's pet registration was still on the books. He was already wearing a pet ring. Even so, Iason wanted the road back to Eos as trouble-free as possible. An Eos-bred pet only left the front gates after its registration was deleted and it had been consigned to the scrap heap. The only exception to the rule was Riki.

As a slum mongrel, Riki existed outside of Pet Law. Though there wasn't any legal reason Iason couldn't bring him back to Eos, groundwork had to be laid to avoid any unnecessary trouble.

The leash was one such indispensable item. Granted, Riki would recoil from being chained again to that collar. That image in his mind, Iason slowly got to his feet and left the room to meet Riki.

Midas. Area 3 (Mistral Park). Genova.

Staring at the large convention center and its accompanying buildings off in the distance, Riki turned off his phone.

Genova in Mistral Park was the closest point to the slums on the official maps. It was past three in the afternoon, but the pedestrian traffic was light. The tourist guides designated the nearby areas as a "red zone," and as a result, even the shuttle buses that ran every Area didn't stop in Genova.

At best, once in a while, a group of thrill-seekers would hop in an air taxi and come to the borderline. That made it an ideal place to hook up with Iason, no questions asked. In any case, the phone—that Iason had given to Riki—wouldn't connect in Ceres. It had nothing to do with frequency allocations or cell tower locations. Signals from Midas into Ceres were deliberately jammed.

On the ground, though the border dividing Ceres and Midas was clearly demarcated, there were no intimidating gates or checkpoints to keep the slum residents in their place. But Ceres was still cut off from the outside world.

It was like an island in an urban sea. If its denizens wished to know what was going on in the outside world, they had to go there on their own two feet and find out for themselves. That was why information dealers were so important in the slums. And informants didn't have a set rate. Everything was negotiable.

Riki traveled to Genova on his jet bike. As it didn't have auto-homing capability, once Iason's capsule car came to get him, he'd

abandon it. It wouldn't sit abandoned for long. A rebuilt jet bike had a lot of value as a status symbol. Or else it would get sold off to a junkyard before the first spot of rust appeared.

Mulling over his bike's fate, Riki lit a cigarette. It was a way to stave off the boredom and keep his hands busy. Or perhaps the behavior of a reluctant returnee. There was already a collar around his neck and Iason held the invisible leash. He'd been holding it for four and a half years.

How did he get here? How did all this happen? Riki knew he was spinning his wheels thinking thoughts like that. No matter how harshly he interrogated himself, the desired answers never came. His only recourse, then, was to face whatever the future had in store for him.

By the time he'd finished the cigarette, the empty T-085 capsule car had arrived. He unslung his knapsack and climbed in. As there was no way of determining its final destination, as soon as the door closed, Riki sat back and closed his eyes.

Ten minutes later, the capsule car glided to a quiet stop. The fare having been prepaid, the doors opened at once. Riki wasn't interested in where he was. It was simply another transfer station on his way to jail. His only job was to wait there until he received another set of instructions.

His phone rang. Iason had calculated the time to the minute. "You arrived?"

"Yeah."

"Come to room three, top floor of the Royal Center Building."

Not "go," but "come." Iason was probably already there and waiting. *A Blonde comes all the way here to personally pick up a pet?*



It struck Riki as funny. He had the feeling Iason was acting way out

of the norm for a Blondy as well. Riki tried cramming his values and common sense into Iason's mold, but the gap between the two irritated him. He was beginning to realize that. But realization wasn't the same as acceptance.

"What about lobby security?"

Riki didn't know why Iason had chosen the Royal Center Building, but any building like it was going to have a security detail.

The passes handed out at Midas immigration control would, according to the access level on the pass, give its bearer free rein. A person without a pass or someone attempting to enter a restricted area would be arrested on the spot.

"Not a problem. Your pet ring number is sufficient."

"The room code?"

"The lock is enabled for iris recognition. Your left eye."

Not wasting time with further chit-chat, Riki confirmed the location of the indicated building on his phone display and headed for it without any hesitation.

The phone was the same compact, unrestricted "smart" model that tourists could use at no additional cost. Voice-guided navigation was included, among other features. But a slum mongrel used to rocketing around the place on his jet bike didn't need all that. A basic map was enough to get him where he needed to be. A slum mongrel who couldn't master the terrain with that much information was going to get his ass handed to him in a fight. Simple survival skills.

Tanagura security was in a different league than Midas's. Entry in each Area was limited to one's ID access level. Riki wouldn't think of driving a capsule car right up to Eos's front gates. But still, the top floor penthouse required a heavy-duty biometric code on top of a general-purpose ID.

It hadn't occurred to Riki that anybody other than Iason would be waiting there. To say that he was surprised was a wild

understatement. The people there, judging by their serial numbers, had come straight off the block from the Pet Auction. A quick head count came to ten.

What the hell is going on?

Riki stared without intending to. He could almost believe he'd walked into the wrong room, but that was impossible. It was easier to believe that somebody with bad taste was playing a bad joke on him.

Right then, one of the ten separated himself from the group and briskly walked up to him. "Hey, you, I'm thirsty," he stated presumptuously. "Get me something to drink."

The boy had pale blue eyes and blond hair. The fact that his voice hadn't yet broken suggested to Riki an age of around ten. Though the kid was young, he was already showing with his arrogance all the signs of the typical pet.

Shameless and stupid. A genetic freak whose primary virtue was his inability to do anything beyond what was programmed into him. "Eliphas" was engraved on the black tag of his collar, the name of the black-haired administrator of Tanagura for whom he was reserved. The pet's serial number would likely be found on the reverse.

A pet's "name" was usually announced at his coming-out party. Up to that point, he was referred to by the breeding facility's manufacturing serial number. According to the furniture, from the first time Riki appeared in Eos, he was the only pet ever called by his name consistently.

Outside the norm, to put it bluntly. Back then, Riki thought Daryl was giving him a hard time about being a slum mongrel. When he found out from Katze that all the furniture in Eos was supplied by Guardian, he realized Daryl's reaction was nothing more than an inferiority complex.

Pets put on the auction block were generally shown off in highly revealing clothing, male and female. The frilly and see-through

garments only covered their privates. Among them, the fact that Riki was wearing a jacket long enough to cover his butt was enough to identify him as an *adult*, a servant at their beck and call.

The drinking water on the table and the hors d'oeuvres had already been consumed, the glasses scattered about.

What to do—

Riki stared into the round orb of the security camera attached to the center of the ceiling. One way or another, somebody was watching in another room.

What to do?

Was there some other ulterior motive for his being called here? Either way, what or who was being tested? Or was he overthinking everything?

Riki hesitated. He thought of just making the trip back to Eos. What the hell was Iason up to? He couldn't read the man. *What does he want with me?* To see how he'd settle a situation sprung on him without any warning? *God, don't tell me he's settling accounts with this bunch of kids?*

Riki couldn't repress a brazen grin as the wildly improbable thought struck him. Now *that'd* be one helluva practical joke.

What was this Eos that awaited them after this? If asked to talk about the bad situation there, Riki could tell all at any time. He focused those thoughts into his eyes as he stared into the camera.

No reaction. *Maybe it's just an ornament.*

The Eliphas pet kicked Riki in the shins. "Hey, didn't you hear me?" He narrowed his eyes and glared at him.

Those skinny little legs couldn't do much damage. *Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, down to the muscle and bone.* That iron law was etched on the hearts of every slum mongrel—a conditioned response. *This little punk-ass kid—*

Riki focused his attention and returned the look. The Eliphas pet quailed and turned away, retreating half a step. *Loser*, Riki clucked to himself. The kid had backed down without raising a finger. It wasn't his job to teach the brat good manners or what he didn't want to know. Riki wasn't in the mood to cause a lot of trouble on his return trip.

He took off his jacket and hung it on an empty chair. He walked over to the island bar in the middle of the room, made a selection from the dispenser, filled a glass with juice, and set it on the table. In addition to the Eliphas pet, the other pets shuffled over.

"I want one of those, too."

"Chamomile for me."

"I'll be good with cherry."

"Mineral water's fine."

The voices of the kids grew shrill as they scrambled to be first in line. Riki was momentarily too surprised to respond. Finally he turned to the pets and roared, "*Shut the fuck up!*"

The stunned rabble fell quiet. They'd probably never been yelled at before in their lives. He gave them all a long, penetrating look, licked his lips, and said, "We're doing this in order, one by one. Everybody who wants a drink, line up!" He motioned with a jerk of his chin. No, it wasn't his calling in life to be a babysitter. But keenly aware of the inherent contradiction, he still did what he did.

At the same time, in the monitoring room, Orphe Zavi, a Blondy and the chief operations officer of Eos, sank back on the sofa and smiled elegantly.

"What a fascinating creature your pet is," he observed. "For good or ill, you have splendidly betrayed all our expectations."

He raked his supple fingers through his luxuriant golden hair. The gesture was at once beautiful, completely expected from such a

beauty.

But the impression that Iason left, with both his visage and inner substance, was that of a cold steel blade. An "ice noble," he was called. In contrast, as one of the lustrous elite, Orphe was an "elegant noble."

"Because that slum mongrel is a cut above the rest," Iason countered just as casually. His attention focused on the screen where Riki was silently serving the nameless pets, who for now were only known by the serial numbers.

He hadn't expected Riki to so demurely stand there and play the part of a house servant. Though it could be that he had anticipated this monitoring and was playing against type on purpose.

Iason couldn't hide a smile of ironic glee. *When it comes to enhancing maturity, time is the true wonder drug.* Taking Riki off the leash and giving him a breather back in the slums had been worth it. At least to Iason.

"Handing over the reins, in other words?" Orphe asked, a casual inquiry with a barbed edge.

"I only want to avoid any unnecessary complications," Iason said, lightly turning it aside.

"After taking advantage of all the loopholes in the pet laws and letting a pet run free in the slums, how can you pretend all that craftiness was for any other purpose? Thanks to you, what we thought was perfect is now shown to be run through with flaws."

Despite the gentleness of Orphe's tone of voice, something quite the opposite clearly lurked beneath. In addition to the disposition of Pet Law, the "Daryl incident," which had resulted in Riki running off, had exposed the problems with Eos security.

It'd been a painful black mark on Orphe's record. But Iason restrained himself from drawing the obvious connection.

"Taking him back to Eos won't be a problem, correct?" Iason asked.

Iason needed to be sure. He couldn't ignore the administrative control Orphe had over Eos. If Orphe said no, Iason would have to switch gears and choose a different tack.

"If I say no, you'll find another way in. Besides—" Orphe paused, and the corners of his lips turned up slightly. "I must confess that I am very curious to find out what your pet will do next."

Iason had the feeling that Orphe wasn't being entirely facetious. Throwing a wolf in with all those obedient sheep could turn things upside down.

Riki had been reared as a pet for three years in Eos. Like a chemical reaction, a wide variety of situations had provoked abnormal changes in the emotional responses of the pets. More than Iason had expected.

At the same time, the disturbed equilibrium shook the staid complacency of the ruling elite, who had become accustomed to the status quo. In a sense, Riki was a catalyst, triggering a new metamorphosis.

Stale, ordinary thinking didn't lead to novel revelations. Without the shock of the new, the synapses even in a specialized brain deteriorated. The elites were only beginning to become aware of the extent to which their "common sense" had stink into the mire of routine and ordinary expectations. Not only the rote learning of knowledge, but their emotional responses as well.

Keeping the disparaged slum mongrels at arm's length had kept these descendants of Midas free of any kind of controls or imprinting. Those categorized as "mongrels" had specialized in their own way. Or maybe Riki was a fluke himself.

Iason didn't think that the other Blondies were asking the same questions he'd once asked himself. They didn't have to. Different approaches yielded different answers, and that was fine with him.

Simply *thinking* about it was worth the value of the contradictions that would arise. Whatever Orphe's objectives, an interest and curiosity in Riki were not necessarily irrelevant.

"That wouldn't be because you think he's looking to cause trouble, would it?" Iason asked. He may have been biased, but he wasn't imagining things. Riki brushed aside the flying sparks as if it were his natural right to do so.

Though seeing things from Riki's perspective, the label of "troublemaker" was completely unearned. *As a slum mongrel, he considered it his natural right to pay back anybody.*

Riki didn't watch his tongue or care about whose feet he stepped on. But there wasn't much point in debating the inability of the idiot pets to learn their lessons in the face of Riki's stubborn and incorrigible sense of payback. It was an extreme kind of physical bonding. Of course, things could get dicey if that behavior ever produced real harm.

"I can't believe you'd ask such a question, not after introducing into Eos a mongrel whose very existence epitomizes a lack of common sense. Do I catch a hint of prevarication?" Orphe's tone of voice was as nonchalant as always.

"Perhaps I'm fed up with trophies that do nothing but stand there and look beautiful."

"So you'll have a slum mongrel instead?"

"A little too lively for your tastes?"

"A little." Orphe hadn't made any attempts at humor thus far, and so was probably indicating his actual feelings on the subject. "In any case, as long as your pet keeps his true nature under wraps and doesn't go around intimidating everybody, I suppose we can go about our duties like normal."

"Changing the subject, do you suppose I could take custody of it now?"

"After the customary medical checkup. We don't want any slum diseases getting brought into Eos."

Compared to the feral children raised in the contaminated Petri dish of the slums, the sterile environment in which the pet gametes were

incubated produced a much more brittle product. At the auctions, that brittleness aroused in the pets a desire to be sheltered and protected, which in turn increased their value.

Beautiful and lovable. Unsullied sex dolls that didn't even have names, that would not shrink from anything as long as the patronage of their owners was secure. How they were trained and for what ends was up to the buyer.

The watchwords of the Pet Auctions were "purity" and "status." A human pet wasn't a mere slave, but a symbol of what only wealth and influence could obtain. Naturally, as sex dolls, they enjoyed no rights and didn't last long. This reality remained undisturbed, especially in Eos. Eventually, they were sold off in Midas. That was all a pet's fate came down to.

"And he'll need a leash. As penalty for an eighteen-month no-show, it's got to be on a leash for at least a month," Orphe said.

"He's going on probation, then?"

"Not in so many words. Simply confining him to quarters after his little walkabout wouldn't constitute penalty."

"You want him as a visible example to others."

"Exactly. Take it out for walks once a day, and don't rush it."

To sum up, for a month, Riki would have to show his face around, above and beyond the customary newcomer routines. Orphe called it a "penalty," and however slight the gesture was in real terms, Iason couldn't help but feel in it the slight stab of revenge.

"Understood."

"Its pet code as well will be changed and reissued. Consequently, it'll have to attend a coming-out party. Dressed properly, of course."

In point of fact, the dress for a coming-out party was really the debut of the pet ring. Normally, a pet ring was an article of jewelry, such as an earring or bracelet, and the various designs on display were part of the competition for the attention of the attendees.

At the previous coming-out party, Riki hadn't sported a pet ring like the others. Quite apart from those ostentatious baubles, his was a custom-made article that doubled as a training device. Processing the order took some time.

The pet ring Riki wore thereafter was a D-type cock ring. Even Orphe was taken aback by this breaking with convention and going with a hidden pet ring. While it had practical training uses, it could only be seen up close at a sex soiree or mating party.

There were as many owners fired up about the possibilities as there were pets turned off by the thought of getting intimate with a slum mongrel, and Iason received a flood of invites. But he hadn't sent Riki to a single sex soiree. Iason kept Riki to himself, and fucked him himself. That triggered an even bigger sensation and a bigger scandal.

"Dressed properly?" Iason asked.

"Yes. I hope to see something more fashionable than that off-the-rack look from last time."

Off-the-rack. To sum up: *Don't cause trouble and play your part.*

And even there, by emphasizing *dress*, Orphe was making his point clear. No pet existed in Eos past the age of twenty. One coming back into the fold was an additional violation of the rules. Iason needed to be prepared to make a public example of him.

"Understood," Iason said with a great show of deliberation. He came slowly to his feet. "I'll make sure everything is well taken care of."

Chapter 3

A deep gulf that conjured up the very meaning of darkness. An inky maze of blackness with no vanishing point. The heavy, cold silence seemed to swallow up the entire world.

There was no telling how narrow or wide, how high or low the reach of the darkness was. When Kirie came to, that was where he was. The gloom constrained his limbs, his voice caught in the dry mucus of his throat. Though his eyes recorded it as dark, no shade or shadow could inform his brain of any other feature.

Where am I? Why was I brought here?

He didn't know. When he tried to remember, the pain cleaved his skull in two. He couldn't tell if he'd been unconscious only briefly or in a coma for years—all he knew was that he felt like he was living in a nightmare.

Why am I here? How long have I been here?

But he didn't know that either. It had to be a dream—a dark dream that kept repeating over and over. His temples throbbed. He couldn't tell where reality ended and where the dream began, or when it would end.

Odds were, he'd been having too much fun and getting high with his friends at the safe house. *His friends?* The guys he ran with? Yes, his friends in Bison. The feared Bison. The undefeated Bison.

Guy. Luke. Sid. Norris. And Riki.

So he was okay, then. If he could remember all their names, then it couldn't have been that bad of a bender. And that meant he'd wake up from this dream. He'd sober up. Eventually.

The way he'd lost track of time, lost track of what had happened, the way his head hurt—it had to have been some cheap stout. He hated the stuff. A quality brand was always better. Vartan was what a man with taste drank. Next time, it'd be on him. A big blowout at

Herma's place.

No, not Herma. Herma had been taken down to a pile of rubble by those Jeeks brats. Then where? Where did he go for a good stout? Where had he been? God, his head hurt. Why the hell did his head hurt so much?

Throbbing—pounding—pulsating—

It was a constant ache rubbing his nerves raw. The heavy pain made him want to throw up. Something thick and muddled was welling up from the pit of his stomach.

He was getting pissed at feeling so sick. His brain couldn't process any other thoughts. He squatted, wrapping his arms around his knees. When he did, the iron band of pain clamped around his skull loosened. He lifted his head.

There in the darkness he detected movement. *What—?*

There was a dull flash of light like a thin gasp of air. Kirie held his breath. The light slowly fluttered, as if beckoning him nearer.

Hey! it seemed to be saying to him, *over here!*

Was it only an illusion? Or a delusion? He didn't know. But, staring at the wavering light, the pain drilling a hole through his head completely vanished.

Here. Come here.

Drawn on by these silent enticements, Kirie put one foot ahead of the other, and with hesitant, unreliable steps proceeded forward. But no matter how far he walked, the wavering light neither drew closer nor further away. It seemed to remain at the same distance, luring him on like an apparition.

What the hell? Kirie was getting impatient. What was it? Was he going to keep on like this without knowing what he was following? A sense of unease suddenly engulfed him.

The inky darkness surrounding him was endless. *There is nobody*

here. The realization came to him all at once. All of his senses turned raw and real. A shiver ran through his body. His face twitched. His feet turned to cement. His groin shriveled up so tightly it hurt.

Why is there nobody here?

Exacerbated by his pounding heart, a profound sense of fatigue swept over him. "If this is a dream, then I've got to wake up!" he cried, and collapsed. He couldn't take another step.

But still, the flickering light beckoned to him. Or, no, when he focused his eyes, the undulations seemed to slow. After one last and final effort, as if to freeze the glimmering light in place by his will alone, Kirie now perceived that the brightness grew with every oscillation, gradually rising above the darkness.

A sphere—strobing front yellow, to orange, and then to red.

What is it?

At some point, that eerie sense of infinite distance had evaporated. What he could never reach no matter how far he walked—what had faded away like a mirage every time he reached out to touch it—as he sat slumped on the ground, it was right at eye level.

He felt that if he reached out his hand, he could grab it. Kirie crawled closer on his knees. The curiosity that pushed aside the anxiety and fear, that emerged from the contracted crevices of his heart, was the real Kirie, his true nature.

Half out of pure reflex, he glanced in both directions, not pausing to consider the irrationality of taking such precautions. He swallowed hard, and reached out his right hand. The tips of his fingers brushed against a vermillion sphere approximately six inches in diameter. Despite its metallic luster, it was neither hot nor cold to the touch, but body temperature. There was nothing off-putting about the feel.

The thought prompted Kirie to let out his held breath with a gasp of relief. *It's okay.* Spurring himself on, he made a more detailed examination with his fingers.

The surface was slippery to the touch. Not too hard, not too soft. Slightly elastic. Having satisfied his curiosity to that extent, he next loosely applied his palm.

The sensation he received was strange. He didn't know what this crimson sphere was, but he could easily get accustomed to the pleasant sensation traveling up his fingers. The strange sense of relief inspired in him greater boldness. He grasped the ball. At that moment, he felt the weight of its true mass as it fell into his hands.

Son of a bitch! He exclaimed silently. His heart jumped, pounding in his chest painfully. But he didn't let go. This mysterious thing was the only source of light in all of this profound darkness.

This is mine. Kirie clutched it to his chest and pressed his cheek against it. *All mine.* Proving it to himself, he kissed it.

It pulsed in response.

He had to be hallucinating. As if Kirie's kiss had awoken the vermilion sphere, it throbbed in response, synchronizing with Kirie's own heartbeat.

Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum.

As Kirie listened closely, the beats induced a profound sense of calm. It was the only living thing in this eerie, silent, dark labyrinth. More than any confusion about what it was, right now he wished to cling to its warm, throbbing presence.

No matter what, he would never let it go.

Chapter 4

A year and a half later, Tanagura was as impressively immense as it had always been. As far as the eye could see, the façade of every building looked exactly the way it should, unsullied by a single spot of dirt. The view was so clean, it stung the eyes. The groves of ziggurats and skyscrapers seemed to reach all the way up to the stars.

No matter how loudly the neighboring Midas cooed and raised her skirts, Tanagura wouldn't even glance in her direction. If she was the slovenly barmaid, then Tanagura was the cool and composed aristocrat. Though they shared the same earth and sky and language, they were the oddest of couples.

The very particular and coldly metallic beauty of Tanagura had not been the city's original defining characteristic. Rather, it had risen as a specialized cybernetic city, built by the androids who busily pursued the ends of their own creation. That was what personified Tanagura's nature.

The mechanical city itself was a distillation of the Unifying elitist ideology of the androids who ran it—that of evolving the capabilities of their own brains and neural pathways into artificial life forms. And their omnipotent creator was the giant, artificial intelligence known as Lambda 3000.

Raised in the stifling, deranged melting pot of the slums, Riki found it hard to breathe in this spotless, uncontaminated, and coldly inorganic part of the planet. Simply being there set his nerves on end and conjured up incoherent feelings of dread.

The one repository of the completely organic in Tanagura—where the warmth of a human body could be felt—was Palace Tower, Eos.

Three different species lived there: the android elite whose only remaining human component was their hyper-evolved brains; the slaves stripped of all human dignity called furniture; and the pets, the mindless dolls bred only for sex.

The reasons for each species' existence had nothing to do with the others. No mutual interest yielded to rational inquiry. No chasms of misunderstanding waited to be filled. Their parallel lines went on forever.

Some sort of deficient and warped existence had flowered there. The reality of it was staggering, and yet that reality somehow rang hollow. Not due to the estrangement of the real from the ideal, but to a curtain of isolation that couldn't abide the slightest tear.

Riki had always thought of the slums as a world full of men crammed together with teeming claustrophobia. It was a refuse heap where they wasted away making the worst of their crippled freedom. But compared to Eos, that crippled freedom was far superior. For with all the apparent leniency in the rules, the degree to which one's actions were curtailed in Eos was nothing like the slums.

In Eos, pets put up with whatever they were given and didn't think about anything except how to be the best sex dolls. That's what pets were imprinted to do. Dazzled by all the luxurious furnishings and accoutrements, they never noticed that they were bound hand and foot.

As far as Riki was concerned, the most objectionable fact of life in Eos was having to slavishly obey every whim of his owner. A pet couldn't think for himself or make his own decisions. The suffering this caused was completely foreign to Eos, a fact that neither reason nor emotion could explain.

Standing one's ground and not going with the flow meant pain and regret. During those three years, Riki had experienced the truth of that fully.

A week had passed since Riki had been imprisoned in Eos once again. As always, he lounged in his spacious room, spending his time doing nothing.

A soft knock and the door opened. Riki's room couldn't be opened

from the inside. All the room's security was accessible only outside the room. In short, "his" room afforded him no privacy.

"Master Riki, it's time," the furniture informed him, in a grating voice Riki hadn't gotten accustomed to.

The furniture's name was Cal. Riki had been surprised when they'd first met. He'd never had reason to doubt that Daryl would still be the furniture attached to Iason's living quarters.

"What happened to Daryl?" he had blurted out. For once in his life, he had no ulterior motive. He was simply curious.

Cal's face went white. Fortunately or not, Riki was looking at Iason at that particular moment and didn't notice his expression.

"There was a turnover in personnel."

As if in a conditioned response, Cal's whole body stiffened again in reaction to Iason's casual explanation, but Riki didn't take note of that either.

"So he's not around, eh?"

Daryl wasn't around, the furniture whose ubiquitous presence had struck Riki as, well, part of the furniture. Riki had been wondering what to say to Daryl when they met, so his absence came as something of a relief. At the same time, the loss of his one confidant in Eos plucked at his heart.

He didn't pursue what Iason meant by a "turnover in personnel." There wasn't any point. Compared to when Riki believed that furniture was a species unrelated to him, his emotional response to them now was quite different.

Knowing the truth about what the furniture was, Riki was forced to look at Cal and remember Daryl in a whole new light.

I was Iason's furniture for five years. That shocking revelation from Katze still reverberated in Riki's ears. All the furniture in Eos comes from the slums.

The unbelievable truth thrust before Riki's eyes made his mind reel. Had anybody but Katze told him that, he would have told them to quit joking. He wouldn't even consider it black humor, just complete bullshit. There was nothing funny about it since a story needed a grounding in fact. The common put-down was no exception, so a slum mongrel becoming a Blondy's pet couldn't be funny.



Being a slum mongrel was the lowest one could get in Ceres. So for

them to become furniture in Eos? Even Riki, who'd experienced an even odder situation, was shocked by Katze's confession.

"A piece of castrated furniture is neither male nor female," Katze had told him, "but a living thing unfinished and incomplete. In truth, coming to grips with that reality took a good deal of time. When human beings lose something they should have, their souls tip out of balance as well. But the pets and their owners don't bother to take much notice of that."

The sudden recollection of Katze's words felt like dry sand in Riki's mouth. *The loss of what should be there.* Those words stung Riki hard.

Furniture started out as thirteen-year-old boys, castrated and installed in an apartment in Eos. Riki had never found out Daryl's true age, but Cal looked like he was fifteen.

Though having the same roots in Guardian as the furniture, Riki had grown up in the slums, where he'd had to stand up for himself to survive. Fifteen was different in Eos. Cal's features had an overall delicacy that gave Riki reason to believe he might be older.

Compared to Daryl, Cal had little experience as furniture and rarely looked Riki in the eye. He studiously did everything the furniture was expected to do with an even frostier attitude. Daryl had been different. Despite usually maintaining a comfortable distance, at the very end, Daryl did his best to meet Riki more than halfway.

In Riki's case, not knowing the truth about the furniture, he'd lumped the awkwardness and the averted eyes together with the usual evasions and expressions of disgust and had ignored them. It still made him feel uncomfortable.

But now, both Riki and Cal knew they were slum mongrels. That was an established fact. The "secret" of Riki's origins was a scandal known to everybody in Eos. But, besides the furniture themselves, only a small number of authorized persons knew of the common origins that the furniture shared with Riki.

There were likely those among even the furniture who were

unaware of the fact that they were slum mongrels. Though, strictly speaking, none of them were since they had never seen the slums. And that included Katze.

The sense of disgust and derision that suffused the word "slum mongrel" was not something that could be dismissed. Riki realized this when he had come to live in Eos four and a half years ago. Because of this, the furniture had much to fear. Being born in Midas would alone make them slum mongrels. They would be treated like lepers.

Furniture were slum mongrels.

That one fact must never be revealed. If it became known in Eos, the social order would break down. If they knew that the food they depended on was being delivered by the lowest dregs of society, the objects of their scorn, the pets would panic.

Eos was a more suffocating, constrained and warped society than the slums. To Riki, it was a jail that negated his reasons for living. And yet, he was not so haughty or self-destructive as to reveal the truth and destroy everything.

Riki was far more than some strange serpent granted access to their garden. He was a foreign substance to be targeted, loathed and expelled. Riki was not a usual pet, but an eternal enemy and threat.

That would never change.

Nothing evolves here, Riki grumbled to himself. That was the real state of Eos. And when a danger was gone, all would be forgotten, like it had never happened. Riki suspected that his three years of humiliation in Eos would ultimately amount to nothing.

However splendid it might appear at first glance, the pet's life was in fact a symbol of the fleeting transience of life. There wasn't a single pet that Riki recognized. There'd been a complete turnover in a mere eighteen months. The sell-by date for a pet was never that far away.

Of course, the pets that he'd never been interested in or curious

about had disappeared from his thoughts. But he hadn't disappeared from theirs. And some of them were still around.

Every day for precisely two hours, Riki was taken for a stroll around Eos. That was what Cal meant when he said, "It's time."

"I'm sorry," Cal said, fastening the black leather collar around Riki's neck. His hands were always tense.

Like the collars worn by other pets during their breaking-in period, this collar was called a "choker." It was a slip-type collar that had to be put on with precision. In order to keep it from rubbing against the skin, it was important that any excess slack be taken up.

Riki wasn't concerned, though. A slum mongrel—laying claim to his territory and vigorously defending it—was made of sterner stuff than the pedigreed pets. Left alone, a few scratches would take care of themselves in a day or two. But for Cal, allowing a pet to be injured would be a calamity. Even more so since his master seemed to care so much about *this* pet.

In Eos, the custom for a new pet prior to his coming-out was—to help him get accustomed to the place—to be led about with a leash and collar by the furniture attached to the residence.

Because acclimation was the goal, the furniture had to be on the ball as well. Starting with learning how to get from the apartment to the salon where the pets gathered, how the elevators operated and the doors worked—it all had to be committed to memory.

Pets weren't literate, and couldn't be expected to handle even the basic aspects of daily life. All the necessary signs and buttons used simple symbols. In the time available, these were taught to the pets using a rudimentary vocabulary. This tutorial period also became a way of testing the functional capabilities of the furniture.

Naturally, pets came in all varieties. Some were quick studies, and some were clearly lacking in intelligence and ability. But it was the furniture who caught the most grief for a pet's clumsiness and

stupidity. It wasn't a pet's fault that he couldn't tell left from right, but the fault of the furniture.

Furniture that couldn't teach the required information to a pet in the time allotted was at a great disadvantage. As long as a pet was obedient, lovable, and sexually insatiable, all else was forgiven, while the furniture caught hell for the slightest stumble.

In Riki's case, however, the stroll around the park was treated differently than that of any new pet. In general terms, during the time when a new pet's face was shown around, the route taken did not require the submission of formal paperwork. It was supposed to be casual.

But not only were Riki's times and routes designated in advance, he also had to wear a precautionary yellow card. No one was allowed to talk with him, or go near him. It was strictly forbidden.

In one way or another, punishment was going to be exacted from Riki, "the one who came back." Wearing a yellow card while taking his walks was like doing a daily perp walk.

Riki had gotten a sinking feeling as soon as Iason had informed him about how things would be. But he'd realized to a sickening extent during those three years that a decision, once made, was set in stone.

Though Riki didn't think much of it, he was the infamous holder of the dreaded red card, the *only* pet to be so disgraced. The established custom in Eos was that any owner of a red card would be slated for immediate disposal.

But Iason, that connoisseur of the bizarre, was perfectly happy ignoring such precedents. In any case, though, penalties imposed on Iason, no matter how illogical, applied to Riki as well.

What a fucking pain in the ass. Aloud, Riki said, "Iason, you seriously got yourself on Orphe's enemy list?"

Riki couldn't help giving Iason a hard time. But, watching a pet with such a bad attitude mouthing off to his owner, Cal looked like

he was about to faint there on the spot.

The furniture cleans up after the pets. That implicit law had been drilled into his head.

"A mongrel like you coming back to Eos becomes the object of interest and curiosity. The intent is to demonstrate what kind of creature this rule-breaking pet is, and expose him to ridicule and scorn," Iason said without betraying any derision.

"Ridicule and scorn? I can put on quite a show, then."

"There's no need to provide anything extra," Iason rejoined casually.

Yeah, for who? Riki thought, but decided against saying it out loud.

Among the elite that embodied the privileged classes, the towering and terrifying pride of the Blondies could be grasped at a glance. But their warped nature was difficult to understand. For a kid from the slums, where the simple logic of force defined the essential conditions to stay on top, it was beyond his comprehension.

As far as Riki was concerned, being used as fodder for Blondy games was the most annoying part. But he knew that voicing such complaints would be useless.

The smothering atmosphere of Eos was such that, despite its expanse, it felt very narrow to Riki. The two-hour time limit seemed a generous amount, but was over in a flash. Even with that, though, as a form of punishment, it was pretty pathetic.

That being the case, it occurred to Riki to sketch out a map of his "route of penance." It wasn't just wasting time, but a specific goal would help motivate him and clear the sludge out of his brain.

It wasn't just his physical body rusting away from lack of use. Becoming accustomed to the daily grind was like drinking a sweet, corroding poison. In time, Riki would cease to be himself. He knew now more than ever that experience was life's best tutor.

The route he walked was determined on a day-by-day basis. Being allowed to amble about wherever he wanted wouldn't be a

punishment. In that case, being ordered to stay in his room would be preferable. Except, ironically, *that* wasn't considered a punishment.

It wasn't clear exactly what sort of warning Orphe intended to give. But a pet that had once shaken off the security measures and escaped the Eos perimeters would surely be at the top of his black list.

Although a high-definition playback system—a required appliance for the illiterate pets—was installed in every room, no pet had access to a smart phone. The terminals used by the furniture were locked with a biometric code, and Riki couldn't access them.

This meant that he had to memorize the route and draw the map in his mind. He didn't consider it a burden. Finding a separate meaning and a hidden pleasure in an imposed penalty was one of Riki's better qualities.

The first three years being trained as Iason's pet, every humiliating day, everything Riki saw, heard, and did tore at his pride. The only thing in his head *then* was reacting in knee-jerk fashion against every insult, escaping Eos, and regaining his freedom.

It had occupied his thoughts every day. Forced to come to terms with this do-nothing reality, all he could do was sulk and pout. No matter how aware of his territory he became, the entire scope of his jail never entered into his field of vision. His feelings and thoughts were directed entirely at what was in front of his face.

But even though he hadn't returned entirely of his own free will, the Riki *now* had latitude that the Riki *then* did not. Now, his self-interest was more calculated.

Four and a half years before, he'd been consumed with loss. But no longer. He still had regrets, tinged by unbreakable mortification and bitterness at being caught in a no-win situation, but he was also possessed by a sexual hunger beyond his control.

Nevertheless, this wasn't despair in pursuit of self-destruction. When he'd been at Guardian, living life for all it was worth, so many of his

friends hadn't adapted. Crushed by the pressures of the environment, they had died before their time. The manner of their deaths had buried itself into the depths of his thoughts.

I'm sorry, Riki. A ragged, worn Ghil clung to him and wept. *I gave it my best shot.*

Heath grabbed hold of his hand. *Don't turn out like me. Promise me, Riki.*

I'm really beat, too, were Raven's parting words. He went to sleep and never woke up.

They'd thrown everything away and given up on life. They had denied their very reasons for existence. That was the last thing Riki would ever do.

Why was a person like Iason, with the absolute power to obtain whatever he wanted, so stuck on him? Riki didn't get it. It'd probably be a challenge for somebody who could read the circuitry of a Blondy brain as well.

Despite Riki's disgust and hatred of his status as Iason's pet, it was something he couldn't deny. He was the pet of a Tanagura Blondy. As heavy and unpleasant as those shackles were, it was clear that Iason would never release him again.

For Riki to continue being Riki, simply submitting to the life of a pet wouldn't cut it. He had to deny everything. Deny his life as a slum mongrel. Deny his libidinous hunger. Deny his unyielding obstinacy and his foul pride.

If he didn't deny everything, no matter what was lost in the process, *something* would remain. Learning upon his return to Eos that the furniture attached to his room was not Daryl but Cal, the necessity of finding a separate reason for being was driven home.

This was the result of his obsession with freeing himself from the yoke of being a pet. When he realized that the freedom he'd regained was nothing more than a brief recess, Riki knew that this curse was bound to the very marrow of his bones.

Being confined to his room and never coming into contact with other pets would avoid a lot of trouble. But Orphe didn't think that was a sufficient penalty. The implicit message was loud and clear. He was jabbing Iason in the ribs and expressing his loathing for Riki. And Orphe no doubt had other plans as well.

The questions repeated themselves in an endless loop. Trapped in the hamster wheel of his own thoughts, Riki knew he was spinning his wheels and getting nowhere. That's why he had to keep his own interests firmly in mind.

Eos pets were valuable primarily as indicators of social class. That was a hard and fast rule, which was why pets decked themselves out and paraded themselves around as if in an eternal fashion show.

Adorable. Beautiful. Bewitching.

Male and female alike, that's what their status depended on. As for their sexual prowess before an audience, being called "shameless" was a compliment. Being termed a "nymphomaniac" sent their value soaring.

In the slums, being physically and mentally tough was what gave a man "sex appeal." Here, it was the opposite.

An Eos male was effeminate, practically a girl with a dick, until he was paired up. No matter how pure the bloodline, the uncouth, the vulgar, and the unsophisticated gained no traction. A pet who didn't make the requisite appearances at the match-up parties would lose book value and eventually any purpose.

Riki, though, had not made his formal debut. But as proof of the special privileges and circumstances surrounding his "return home," Riki made no effort to hide the hickies on his skin.

There was nothing in Riki's eyes that showed any desire to heedlessly stir the blood of the other pets. Not only could he not refuse sex with Iason, but fighting wouldn't make any difference. Still, even with that collar and leash attached, he wasn't going to cower or kiss up.

But he wasn't going to make a big deal about it either. Nor was he looking to insinuate himself into their good graces. There was steel in those jet-black eyes of his, eyes that discerned more than the who, and cut through childish pomposity like a scythe.

That inimitable and electric sense of being alive was like that of a wolf introduced into a flock of lambs. Wherever Riki walked, everyone stopped and stared.

Riki was supposed to be a pilloried man. But they couldn't turn their eyes away, furtively exchanging whispered gossip at a safe distance and never meeting his gaze. Cal, holding the end of the leash, definitely felt the vibe of "something different."

This wasn't the product of a prosaic "generation gap," but living proof that the accepted view of the world in Eos did not always hold true. Riki's irrational return wasn't at the heart of the matter. Rather, it was Riki's individualism on full display.

Finding their own selves matched against the overwhelming power of his natural self, the surrounding throngs were swallowed up by his presence and shrunk away. And not just the bystanders. Walking side by side with Riki, Cal's gait was liable to become hesitant and cramped.

More than a few times, Cal stumbled, jerking on the platinum alloy chain connected to the slip collar around Riki's neck, making him gag and come to a skidding halt. Cal would bow and apologize for the blunder.

Then try and keep a looser rein, dammit. But wouldn't accomplish much, so Riki never vocally criticized him. Still, an outsider couldn't be blamed for wondering which one of them was being punished. Cal, to be sure, must be at a loss on how to handle this older and thoroughly notorious pet.

Moreover, the eccentric tastes of Cal's owner were as far removed from those of a proper Blondy as could be imagined. And the way Iason looked after Riki was doubly flabbergasting.

But that wasn't cause for any inclination to compromise on Riki's

part. Just because the furniture came from the slums wasn't sufficient reason to get up close and friendly with him. The same way that Daryl had kept his distance, Riki would do the same.

Years ago, the kind of torture Iason put Riki thorough in the name of "training" was many times worse than any kind of physical punishment. He'd suffered the humiliation of being perched on Iason's knees while being orally serviced by Daryl, Riki's nerves burning like a white hot flame. But Daryl had never overstepped the boundaries defined for him as furniture.

No matter what, Daryl was always subservient to Iason's wishes. His reason and self-restraint were unaffected by emotion, and he relentlessly kept himself in control.

Riki had come to understand Daryl's emotions to a painful extent. Even when confined to a single room together, pet and furniture weren't there to lick each other's wounds. If they got too friendly, it could be fatal for everyone involved. There could be no friendship between pet and furniture, a fact Riki couldn't admonish himself about enough.

Chapter 5

It was the day of Riki's coming-out party. After scrubbing him from head to toe, Cal brought in a change of clothes and reverentially presented Riki with what looked like the black leathers he used to wear. Underneath, Riki wore a simple silver mesh tank top. Compared to the synthetic fabrics available in the slums, the difference in quality—in weave and touch and feel—was like comparing heaven and earth.

The leathers were far better than the sheer garments that some pets wore, leaving them as good as naked, so Riki couldn't help raising an eyebrow, waiting for the other shoe to drop. He might have thought he was reading too much into it, but when in the company of other Blondies, Iason's thinking remained beyond his grasp.

"You want me to put this on?" Riki asked.

"Yes," Cal replied crisply. "Our master picked it out for you."

I could swear this is the same outfit I wore back when I was sixteen.

Before, upon looking at the clothes Daryl handed him, Riki couldn't think of them as anything more than payback for all the abuse Riki gave Daryl. But then he realized that what the rest of the pets were wearing was even worse.

The reasons became perfectly clear later on.

The pets he'd encountered previously in that penthouse suite were kids who hadn't begun to sprout. Riki wearing the same kind of glittering, spangled, revealing clothing would leave a bad taste in anybody's mouth.

The underwear, though, consisted of a single-layer, T-back thong that covered his privates. While not overtly revealing, it provided a provocative look at the entire line of his body.

Established custom was that the fashions worn at a coming-out party were intended to showcase the pet ring. Last time around,

Iason curtly said that Riki was "still in training," and had left it at that. Iason could only get away with that kind of grandiosity because Riki was a slum mongrel and a true exception to the rules.

But the fact that Riki was wearing a special-order D-type pet ring was already being whispered about, so Iason couldn't pull a stunt like that again. Knowing that, the choice of black leather was just Iason being perverse. Or perhaps he was exacting his own brand of payback because of the penalties Riki was forced to shoulder.

Almost as if Iason had timed it down to the second, he showed up just as Riki was fully dressed. His normally flowing hair was neatly combed back. Iason looked Riki over, his eyes gliding across Riki's features like a tongue across a pair of lips.

"Good job," Iason stated, the cool tone of his voice unchanged.

This was why Riki's comeback, unburdened by irony, was an almost conditioned response. "You mean, if you took a crude and ill-bred monkey and polished him up right, you'd get the same result?"

"It's showtime and tonight's the big finale. Try to enjoy yourself," Iason said nonchalantly, knowing that Riki would not be enjoying himself.

Riki glared at Iason with upturned eyes. "So long as I don't cause you any unnecessary embarrassment."

"Well, not outside the bounds dictated by common sense."

"Huh. So supposing I don't actually trash the place, somebody else is bound to trip over his own two feet. Is that it?"

That would be exactly it, which pissed Riki off to no end. Everybody'd be showing up hoping for some trouble.

"Of course, you wouldn't be so boorish as to pull the same stunt twice, now, would you?" Iason asked.

But of course, *Riki* wouldn't. *So that's what this comes down to?*

Iason would have understood that there wasn't much purpose doing

dry runs or mapping out worst-case scenarios, and so raising the issue like this could only be his way of inviting trouble on purpose.

"You want me to stir up a little excitement for entertainment purposes?" Riki asked with a sigh.

"Not a bad idea," Iason said, coolly. "Think of it as the cost of admission to your cotillion."

Iason's attitude was the perfect distillation of the perverse pleasures that ruled the Blondy world.

Not that Iason cared in the slightest about being described in such a manner.

Even if treated carefully, trouble had this annoying way of reaching out to Riki like an octopus and wrapping its tentacles around him. The way Iason could pull his strings and make him dance like a marionette was bad enough. Getting dragged into a scandal and set up for a fall was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Well, when the time comes, we'll just play the cards as they're dealt," Iason said as he applied Riki's finishing touches himself, fastening Riki's collar and picking up the leash in an elegant and practiced manner.

It was seven o'clock in the evening. Ignoring the awkwardness in the air and the pervasive sense of apprehension, Iason arrived brazenly at the coming-out party, Riki in tow at the end of the leash. The soft murmurs of conversation ceased, replaced by an uneasy silence.

Riki was clearly not in a good mood. To the new pets, this may have been their once-in-a-lifetime gala occasion. But to Riki, it was just another scene in an ongoing farce.

Gazing on from their vantage point, the elites couldn't hide the curiosity in their eyes. The attention of their pets, cowering meekly at their feet, was on Riki. After being pilloried in public for a month, they knew the face and the name. To them, all his badness

was being paraded in front of their faces.

Contempt and jealousy and hatred. Riki was used to it all. That he was a Blondy's pet was a ripe rumor around Eos. Though none of them doubted it was true, seeing Riki with his rarely seen owner aroused in them more than simply curiosity, but gave an unexpected shock to their senses.

A Blondy from the very top of the power structure and a despicable slum mongrel from the very bottom. The combination was almost impossible to contemplate. This impossibility—a pairing that by its very nature was taboo—came directly into their fields of vision. It was a combination of black and gold that sent their emotions into overdrive.

The Riki they had all come to know and hate over the past month was being led—not by a piece of furniture—but by Iason. That generated another murmur of surprise.

The unbelievably sharp and trim lines, as if sculpted in granite. The aura of exclusivity. The undeniable truth of what they were seeing struck them speechless. Riki waited for the expected words of censure and derisive laughter from the other owners, but, with a single meaningful glance from Iason, the source of real authority was driven home.

Aside from the cold, hard fact of being *Iason's* pet, Riki didn't put much stock in being a Blondy's pet in the first place. The rest was an afterthought. He had no need for pretention. Despite how much he came across as a provocateur to outside eyes, the desire to act that way on purpose never crossed his mind.

Housed inside a cage especially made for them, the new pets were called by name for the first time. It was their moment in the spotlight. Riki thought it was a pain in the neck. It didn't matter to him that no other pet before or after him would taste that glory twice. That alone was enough to draw blatant expressions of jealousy and animosity.

During their brief moment in the sun, the newcomer pets put themselves on display. More than Riki drawing lines in the sand,

the pets took it as a way to distinguish themselves from him. For Riki, this was far preferable to their clumsy attempts at picking quarrels with him.

Compared to the rest of the kiddies, he glowed with the full, supple ripeness and dignity of adulthood. It stood to reason that regardless of what anybody wanted or was waiting for, no reckless interloper would venture into his territory.

This was the biggest difference from his first cotillion. Back in the penthouse suite, the pets had mistaken Riki for the help. Now they acted completely differently, doing their utmost to avoid Riki's gaze. But the gap between the pretense and their irrepressible curiosity could not be disguised.

What a letdown. Well, time to rest the old brain cells and take it easy. Riki had no regrets. Iason's "entertainment" wouldn't be forthcoming. This was, for Riki, a great accomplishment.

As a consequence, he could switch his attention to the virtual display above the cage where each pet's profile was being displayed. The last time around, the constant abuse and scorn directed at him had kept him too busy answering in kind. He hadn't even noticed it.

So Orphe's pet came off the Vardia line. Getting an Onyx-class product costs money. This guy likes to show off when it comes to personal possessions.

Nothing but the best for the elites. They always had first pick of the pets each manufacturing center produced that were commensurate with their class and rank.

If a Blondy at the top of the heap would go so far as to take a slum mongrel and then bring it back to Eos, then the rest could perhaps indulge in an indiscretion or two as well. Things might start loosening up.

So all the males have been circumcised? Must be in fashion now.

The cock was a symbol of strength and power. In the slums, erectile

function, endurance and technique were rated the top three attributes when it came to evaluating male performance below the waist. The belief that foreskin hid too much was indicative that fickle preference still held sway.

That by itself didn't automatically mean approval of circumcision in the slums, though. Survival of the fittest ruled in the slums. A knife wound to the penis was likely to be taken as evidence of a "lynching." Whatever reason, a mongrel sporting such scars could never be taken seriously.

Go cruising at a pick-up bar for no-strings-attached sex and there were plenty of options for a mongrel to choose from. But, no matter how forgiving a guy was, whispers of *that* kind of thing were different.

In Eos, it was said—in what passed for vulgar humor—that peeling back the foreskin of the virginal pet and instructing him in the ways of masturbation was the job of the furniture. Other than that, sexual contact between pets and furniture was severely punished when discovered. Of course, the rules didn't apply when it was the master's orders.

If Riki remembered correctly, in the case of male pets, the foreskin was considered proof of virginity, and its presence at the pet's first sex soiree was widely taken by the other pets as a bonus value.

But these values meant nothing. It was just an excuse for the pets to make declarations and then mouth off that slum mongrels weren't in the same league. It only made Riki conclude that they were as stupid as ever.

Riki didn't care about their stupidity. But since he had left, there were different pets in Eos now. As there was nothing else to do while this show and tell business was going on in the cage, Riki busied himself studying the pet profiles, making a note of each name and face.

"What a bore."

Sitting at a table in a location closest to the cage reserved especially for the Blondy pets, Gideon Lagat leaned back in his lounge chair and grumbled with obvious displeasure. As if he was the cause of his master's ill mood, Gideon's pet shrank and cowered at his feet.

Normally, when pets got together, the gossip flowed. On special occasions such as this, though, they accompanied their masters. No unnecessary chatter was permitted. All a pet could do was sit patiently at his master's feet.

When visiting the salons designated especially for the pets, there was food and drink set out for them, and the pets could partake to their heart's content. But at formal events, they couldn't eat anything unless their master gave it to them. Being required to behave at a formal event was extremely stressful for them.

A pet's misbehavior was the master's shame.

Bad behavior at a formal event would be disciplined proportionately harshly. As part of their training, every pet in Eos had experienced corporal punishment, and the fear and pain that accompanied it made them slavishly obedient.

"What do you find so boring?" Orphe inquired, a hint of disapproval in his voice. He had organized the cotillion, so his reaction was to be expected.

"It's the same as usual. No surprises. Like I said, boring."

"No surprises?" queried Aisha Rosen, a smile on his lips.

There had once been "friction" between Aisha's pet and Riki. Or, rather, Riki was on bad terms with all the pets, but the friction with Aisha's pet was the worst.

Strictly speaking, it was a one-sided grudge. Whenever Riki came into his field of view, Aisha's pet would go after him, and get beaten. There was no reconciling the pride of the Academy-manufactured pet with a slum mongrel's bullheadedness.

Though a pure-blood pet was created through selective breeding, he still possessed those natural male instincts that prompted him to

mark his territory and bare his fangs. Riki had observed the truth of this all around him.

Raoul termed it "pheromone-triggered aggression," a chemically induced biophysical chain reaction. Aisha, on the other hand, believed the data alone was insufficient to explain the phenomenon. Riki was evincing an undiscovered factor in some inexplicable form. The sheer strength of the infection intrigued him, though he was always sure to express his theories using vaguer language.

"But mixing this homecoming wolf in with all these little lambs is exciting enough, is it not?" Marcus Jayd pointed out. He made no attempt to hide his implicit criticism of Iason's ways.

"But the excitement from crossing paths with the wolf is insufficient."

"Exactly what manner of excitement are you looking for?"

"The kind of novel entertainment you'd hardly ever see without opportunities such as this," said Gideon, cutting right to the chase.

"Oh, I see. And what do you think, Iason?"

"Carrying off his debut without a blunder is his job, isn't it?"

"You're hardly one to talk, ignoring the cotillion dress standards. Not very convincing." A sidelong glance accompanied Silbert Domina's dig. "What are the notable new features of this boomerang of yours? Were you hoping for a replay of last time?"

Iason answered breezily, "No, I think that would be off-putting this time."

As was to be expected, Raoul remained closed-mouthed. He was first among the moderates hoping only for the coming-out party to conclude on an uneventful note.

Even a passing remark from Riki could double his influence on the other pets. If that happened, all those with weak immune systems would succumb. Last time, the trauma Riki induced among the pets caused a plague of psychosomatic illnesses.

No matter how much of an "adult" Riki had become compared to then, at the end of the day, a mongrel's nature wasn't something that could change overnight.

"Returning him to his old haunts seems to have sharpened his mongrel instincts."

"You're saying he's regrown a pulled fang?" Iason asked.

Whether said in admiration or not wasn't clear, but the way Iason's comrades were speaking—making no effort to hide their inherent curiosity—made him raise an eyebrow.

"He does look more into erotic bondage play than gratuitous nudity."

Aisha's comment prompted a few knowing smiles here and there. The pets at their feet—who couldn't follow the gist of their masters' conversations—were startled at the unnatural grins they displayed. The pets looked on fascinated, as if in a collective daze.

"So you're still using that same D-type ring?"

"Indeed," Iason said.

"He really needs to be schooled that often?"

"It's simply a matter of sticking with what is most comfortable."

"He's the only pet so ill-natured as to require a cock ring."

"A similar sort of ring was popular for a time, but it seems to have fallen out of style."

That particular type of ring was a three-stranded pouch that held the cock and balls of a male pet tightly fastened to its groin. It'd once made the rounds fueled by curiosity, but ultimately served no other purpose except to turn the privates into a vulgar display. It proved unsuitable for mating parties, and thus earned a bad reputation.

At the end of the day, the value of a pet ring was primarily as an

accessory and ID. Consequently, when it came to making fine adjustments during an erection, a bejeweled harness had its limits. Also, many found the younger males with lower pain thresholds crying from the pain while climaxing unappealing.

"The value of a pet ring is in showing it off. Don't you think, Iason?"

"A slum mongrel has no use for baubles so far beyond its means and class," Iason answered promptly and without the slightest hint of umbrage.

Riki possessed that rare sense of himself. He didn't flatter anyone unnecessarily, and he gave whatever he committed himself to everything he had. Those two obsidian eyes of his were more valuable than any gemstone.

The pets at the Blondies' feet had no idea what a D-type pet ring was, and had never seen one. But they knew it was used especially to break males. So they took Iason's words at face value. Such a crude article was all this rough and wild slum mongrel deserved.

They'd heard the truth straight from Iason's mouth: pedigreed pure bloods like themselves were a class apart, far above such lowly scum. Thinking that, the roiling jealousy abated somewhat.

But the Blondies knew differently. Riki's custom-made, high-tech ring had cost more than any piece of jewelry. They hadn't yet been able to ascertain its utilitarian functionality with their own eyes, because Iason had never sent Riki to a mating party or sex soiree.

"Iason, how about a bit of entertainment to pick up the pace?"

"And what would that be?" Iason asked.

"A sneak-peek at how a D-type ring works in practical use?"

"Haven't I fully satisfied the penalties for bringing it back here?"

"That's why I said, a bit of *entertainment*," Gideon insisted.

"Exposing the newcomer to a little abasement is one of the unspoken rules of the cotillion. The rest of the stars of today's show

have already been christened unto Eos in our special cage. Why should this one remain above it all?"

Pressing his own strained interpretation of the situation, Gideon jerked his chin toward the cage. Inside, bathed in the gleaming spotlight, the new pets were awkwardly flaunting their amiability and availability. Perhaps feeling the pressure of having all eyes upon them, for some time they had been pouring and draining one drink after another. But Riki was the only one who hadn't picked up a glass.

"I see. As one would expect, the watchful wariness of the returner is on full display."

"Won't the presence of such an abomination at the debut of these brand new pets cause some trauma?"

"That does make the exhibition all the more interesting, though."

The Blondies smiled sly, crooked smiles. The pets at their feet exchanged glances, their cheeks flushing as they couldn't help but recall the foolishness of their own coming-out parties.

"Considering the degree to which the veins of the typical slum mongrel are steeped with crude and suspect drugs, that one is remarkably clean."

"His low level of resistance was an unexpected surprise."

The table in the center of the cage was well stocked with a variety of cocktails and mixed drinks, all spiked with aphrodisiacs. That was why Riki didn't go near them.

That was what Gideon was calling a violation of the rules. If Riki wouldn't play along, then some other offsetting variable would have to be introduced and the D-type ring would be perfect. It was much more than an ornament. Iason had it made specifically to train a slum mongrel into a Blondy pet. But the wild creature was not yet in perfect form.

Of course, according to the specs of this made-to-order ring, it had but one purpose. Gideon was insisting on seeing that special feature

in action because, so far, nobody had. As before, Iason's disinclination to dispatch Riki to the mating parties was legendary. Let this opportunity slip by, and another was unlikely to present itself.

Hence this course of action. Though the desire to see the specialized nanotechnology at work in a real-world setting clearly arose out of more than pure intellectual curiosity.

"Very well," Iason declared after a great show of deliberation, and lightly manipulated the large ring on his left middle finger.

Inside the special cage, Riki finished scanning the pet profiles on the virtual display. His attention went to table and the open bar, where a flock of the kiddie pets had gathered. He clucked his tongue. *Hey, guys. No matter how thirsty you are, that shit won't help. I'm not playing that game again.*

Riki knew there was no ordinary water on tap. Recalling what he'd experienced his first time was enough to send a shiver down his spine. Back then, after starting fights with the Academy-bred pets, he'd downed half the bar, his throat drier with every drink.

The other pets had been putting on airs and filling their glasses daintily from the pitcher, but Riki had picked up the pitcher and drained it, the nectar overflowing his mouth and cascading down his chin. He hadn't given a damn. He'd licked his lips and wiped his chin with the back of his hand.

Yeah, I was so bad.

Both the caged pets and the spectators openly sneered and catcalled, but Riki turned a deaf ear. Slum mongrels weren't into *nuance*, so he'd had no need to maintain any kind of reputation.

He'd wanted to embarrass Iason with vulgar, wild behavior the rest of the pets couldn't copy if they tried. Drive his fist right through that Blondy's honor and self-image.

But then, that fire in his belly had suddenly died down, turned into

something else. His spine had started burning, a strange and sluggish throbbing, a slow fuse working down to the charge. By the time he'd recognized the unmistakable signs of arousal, it was too late.

Slum mongrels were considered adults at the age of thirteen. Eos pets were engineered into early bloomers ready for the sex soirees by the age of ten. Being older, Riki had long ago lost his virginity. Naturally, his partner had been Guy. The spiritual bond he shared with Guy was strong, and when they were together, anything they did was the best, including the sex.

If Guy was in the mood, they did it. That was all it took. So their sex together was always warm and affectionate. They fucked each other until fully satisfied. Neither left the other one wanting more. There was no need to wolf down the meal.

But when Riki was hauled off to Eos, Daryl was going down on him daily and Iason's hands explored the very roots of his pleasures, making Riki's body acutely tuned to every sensitive touch. His passions were easily inflamed by aphrodisiacs, and, once ignited, the fire of sexual pleasure could not be extinguished.



At his first coming out, he'd plunged his hand down the front of his

bikini briefs and grabbed himself hard. His nipples had hardened so that the friction or cloth against flesh was enough to make his chest jump. The raging heat built up unbearably throughout his body. Scalding. Throbbing. Spasming. Yet no matter how vigorously he'd masturbated, he couldn't come, he couldn't ejaculate.

The aphrodisiacs in the drinks were designed to sexually excite the inexperienced, but not allow the body to orgasm. Worse, though, was that while the stimulants had no side-effects on the virginal Academy pets, they were particularly harsh on Riki.

Every pet cultivated in the sterile environment of the manufacturing centers were perfectly maintained, so that drugs had no side effects for them. They spread their legs and cooed as they groped their ripened genitalia and generally made fools of themselves over and over, while Riki's body twisted in agony. The drugs designed for pets were torture to his slum mongrel body.

The next morning, when he'd woken up in his bed, the memories came flying back at him. He couldn't remember exactly what he'd done, except that it was embarrassing. On top of that, due to the lingering side effects of the drugs, he'd had a hangover like he'd gotten drunk on cheap stout. He had spent the rest of the day curled up in his bed.

Because of that painful experience, Riki never touched any of the drinks offered at the pet salons, nor any of the snacks and desserts offered between meals.

No matter how dry his throat might be, he only ate from a safe stash of fruit he kept in his room. And when he headed off to the workout rooms to get some exercise, he always brought his own bottle of water.

Daryl had said that Riki didn't have to be so paranoid, but at the time, Riki didn't trust anybody. From the moment he stepped outside his room, he was entering a world that hated and despised him, full of people that valued his life as nothing. Though he didn't doubt that he could settle any score on his own terms, his wary senses rebelled at the thought of eating any food at the salons, and that distrust wasn't getting expunged any time soon.

After that, he and Iason had attended any number of coming-out parties. Iason was happy to let him skip all the other events, but attendance at the cotillions was mandatory. Riki had nothing to say about the matter. But he hadn't looked once at that cage where he'd been so cruelly humiliated. He'd stayed at Iason's feet and napped, or sulked, or listened to music on his headphones. When the other Blondies had pointed out that Riki wasn't behaving properly, Iason ignored them.

That's how Riki had concluded that the pets had a special affinity and immunity to the drugs in the spiked drinks. These coming-out parties served as little laboratories, with the new pets as the guinea pigs.

Based on that data, aphrodisiacs were synthesized to sync with a pet's individual reactions, and then were deployed at the sex soirees. A pet's greatest virtue was its horniness, and that was imprinted on its brain matter.

Riki had never been dosed with those kinds of aphrodisiacs because he'd never hooked up with anybody else, in public or on the sly. Except for Mimea. And that indiscretion had occurred only once. In Eos, where "free sex" in public was the name of the game, Riki hadn't so flagrantly exposed himself again in the past four and a half years.

As far as Riki was concerned, his first cotillion had been enough. He'd never be able to scrub the memory of that ugly incident from his mind. So no matter how parched he became, he wouldn't take advantage of the open bar in that cage.

Some of the pets were already getting heavy-lidded and blurry-eyed. Faces flushed, others were yelping like junkyard dogs. The virginal males and the barely blooming females acted equally like they were in heat, displaying their sexual arousal in whatever forms came to their inexperienced imaginations. This was what actually "came out" at a coming-out party, the true source of enjoyment for the spectators.

At least this farce should be over soon enough, Riki thought, casting a cursory glance in the direction of the spectators, gritting his teeth

like a wolf baring its fangs.

At that moment, the ring on his groin began to heat. At first, it was hardly enough to notice. A strange and passing sensation. In the next moment came the sensation of a warm tongue lapping at the tip of his cock.

Riki gulped. *What the hell—?* He wasn't imagining things. There was a tingling pulsing as the ring stimulated the nerves beneath his skin. Ripples of pleasure rushed like waves from the center of his groin. It was an unstoppable, racing current of bliss.

Riki opened his eyes wide. *That fucking bastard!* Twisting around, he glared at the table where Iason and the rest of the Blondies were seated.

"Look at that. No need to parse the meaning of *that* reaction."

"Shattered his poker face pretty quickly."

"So that's what cutting-edge technology can do. I shouldn't be surprised."

"What's with that evil eye? I don't like the way he's looking at us."

"I think we've hurt his pride, plain and simple."

"Iason, you need to crack the whip a little harder. You're leaving too much play in the leash."

"Interesting reaction, though. He's completely changed."

"Iason, what kind of precision of control are we talking about?"

The gang of Blondies all breezily chattered on, their eyes fixed on Riki. But, regardless of what they were saying, the pets were transfixed by the fire in Riki's eyes, and the inherent violence they saw shocked them. This evidence of Riki's unwavering spirit brought a smile to Iason's lips.

In Eos, there was a remaining rite of passage that marked the new pets as members of the privileged classes. Once the "coming-out" had satisfied everybody's curiosity, the cage around the pets was taken away. But none of them clambered to their feet. Their brains were so soggy with sex that none of them could. And that was as it should be.

The hypersexualized condition of the newcomers was examined from every angle and projected on the virtual displays. At the same time, regardless of rank or seniority, the veteran pets scrambled to get a closer look at the newcomers, who had until moments ago been cavorting through their waking wet dreams.

Pets had their own ways of enjoying themselves. Even with the night's "entertainment" concluded, the newcomers' baptism of fire was far from over.

But then Riki—hunched over—slowly got to his feet.

The pattering feet of the rushing pets suddenly came to a halt. Riki hadn't guzzled down the spiked drinks. But about halfway through the festivities his manner had clearly changed. The other owners mused among themselves that, as part of his punishment, the returner had been dosed with a time-delay aphrodisiac.

The veteran pets hadn't been listening carefully to what their owners were saying, but they had noticed—with a gloating sense of satisfaction—that the slum mongrel had lost the haughty look on his face. But then they also realized that this dangerous slum mongrel was now loose among them.

As if to draw a clear line of demarcation between himself and the rest of the pets, Riki stood tall. He took a deep breath and leveled a terrifying look around the room that cut through the other pets like a scythe. He awkwardly walked toward the table where Iason was sitting.

As if drawn by invisible lines—or pushed aside by the sheer force and fear of his presence—the pets cleared the path before Riki. He

moved with deliberate and measured steps, though it was not his usual crisp stride.

The pets who had quietly and obediently crouched at their masters' feet during the cotillion were suddenly gone.

The top thirteen Blondies in Eos were sitting at the table Riki headed toward. Far from cowering, Riki looked into the faces that embodied supreme power without a flicker of fear.

"These slum mongrels are stubborn creatures," Orphe remarked, half in amazement.

"And after a year and a half," said Aisha, equally nonplussed. "The older it gets, the more brazen it becomes."

"This strange beast continues to act contrary to all expectations," said Gideon with a lopsided grin.

But Riki's attention was focused on no one but Iason. He said, his voice unnaturally hoarse, "Turn it off."

That faint throbbing still pulsed through his loins.

"Turn what off?" Iason queried. His unflappable tone of voice was like fingernails across a slate blackboard. Compared to Riki's own lack of composure, Iason had oceans to spare.

Riki's eyes narrowed with danger. "I said, shut it the fuck off."

Such unbecoming pride for a pet. Such inexcusable language. The sight of a pet—pledged above all to total subservience—abusing his master sent the rest into an uproar. It was a glimpse of the slum mongrel's much-rumored nature.

"Why didn't you avail yourself of the drinks in the cage?" Iason asked.

Being asked that only ticked Riki off more. "What idiot drinks knowing it's drugged?"

"That's part of the penalty."

"You shitting me?" Riki's eyes narrowed to slits, his lips a tight line.

"You're the only one who's ever come back. Flaunting such gestures of generosity has been taken by some as a violation of the customary rules of etiquette."

By who? Riki didn't need to ask. He turned the roiling heat in his eyes on the line of Blondies at the table.

"Iason," Silbert said acerbically, "that thing really hasn't been housebroken at all."

Unless instructed otherwise by his master, a pet was supposed to kneel and supplicate before him. Every pet knew that. Riki knew that. But that faint, incessant pulse cast his heart and thoughts into wild disorder, leaving his mind empty of logic.

"I see," said Iason, and gave the ring another slight twist.

A deeply stabbing pain suddenly interrupted the woozy throbbing between Riki's legs. He uttered a strangled scream and collapsed on the spot.

Whatever had been generating that faint pulse before now seemed to take careful aim at all of his pleasure centers. In response to the stimulation, Riki grabbed his groin and doubled over, his limbs twitching.

That—fucking—bastard—shut—it—off—

The sensations governed by the ring continued unabated, with precision and a steady rhythm. Riki had forgotten the inorganic pleasures created by the ring. When Iason fucked him it amplified the sensations and made him last longer. He'd been unable to accustom himself to the unique feelings Iason could arouse in him. All Riki could do was flail and utter guttural groans.

I'm going to kill him! Someday that fucker is dead!

Riki's inexpressible, inarticulate loathing seemed as much a self-administered curse as one directed outwards. Damning Iason in one clenched breath, and moaning uncontrollably, rapturously in the

next.

Iason's drug circulated through his body, soaking inexorably into the core of his being. Riki shuddered and groaned, his back arching. He knew how shameless he could get when the brakes came off.

Shut it off—!

But he couldn't stop himself from revealing all.

Shut the damned thing off—!

It was the worst of the worst.

Iason came languidly and gracefully to his feet. He strode to where Riki writhed silently in cruel bliss. He crouched down next to Riki and wound his fingers through the tousled black hair. He murmured, "This is the penalty for having such bad manners."

Not for being a returner, not for violating the rules of the coming-out party, but for behaving so rudely on a formal occasion.

Riki gritted his teeth as the sparks of pleasure stroked and scalded his brain. The scheming Blondies had goaded Iason, and he'd swallowed the bait all the way down to the pole. It'd be too vindictive to say that a man reaped what he sowed. The fever burning in Riki's skull was a different creature altogether.

The coming-out party ended at ten o'clock in the evening.

Riki and Iason left as they had come, with the leash attached until they arrived back at the residence. Riki carried the heavy weight of penitence on his shoulders.

"Welcome home," Cal said, but his mannerly welcome sounded far away. Riki took deep breaths, calming his racing pulse. Above and beyond his physical condition, his state of mental exhaustion had only increased.

And it still wasn't over. The fever that had gripped him at the party

hadn't abated. The heat and sweat had plastered his thin tank top to his skin. Though the ring's stimulating pulses had ceased, the reverberations still tormented his senses.

It was so curious and so vexing. *Why? What for?* It took all his will not to just find a spot on the floor and go to sleep right then and there. He braced his trembling legs and waited for the leash to be unhooked.

"Take off your clothes," Iason commanded.

That gave Riki an unexpected start. While Cal's voice had come from far away, Iason's relaxed and lilting voice echoed as if from the center of his benumbed brain.

What? He didn't ask. *Why?*

Like he always did, Cal reached to take Riki's jacket. Normally, when Iason wasn't watching, Riki undressed himself quickly. Now, he didn't have much of a choice in the matter.

Dressing and undressing a pet was the furniture's responsibility. Riki had seen it all before—the mortification and contempt that followed upon Iason's lovemaking. As he had with Daryl, Iason made no attempt to hide from the furniture what was going on.

Cal didn't seem to mind cleaning up Riki—his body was wet and sticky and dripping with lubricants and his own ejaculate. Or Cal had just gotten used to it. Including where and what and how to scratch every itch.

It was the job of the furniture to do what had to be done. And when it wasn't done, it came back on the furniture's head, as the result of his carelessness. The unreasonableness of a task never factored into the equation. No excuse was ever good enough. Riki had learned that well enough during his three years with Daryl.

Back then, Daryl had told him, "I exist to make sure that you spend every day in comfort while in this room. That is the job I was given. That is the source of my pride. For someone like you, who never had to depend on anybody for anything, this must be painful. But

what passed for common sense in your world does not hold here in Eos. So I'm begging you, Master Riki, let me do what I have to do."

The sincerity in Daryl's words now bound Riki, resting with a different kind of weight upon his shoulders.

He couldn't stop his ears to the maledictions poured out against Katze, at the bottom of it all. What he knew could not be made unknown. All Cal could do was stay quiet and pretend.

Your jacket please. Your shoes. Trousers. Tank top.

While Cal deftly undressed Riki, Riki looked down at his feet and said nothing. Though the truth was that, even standing stock still, his body couldn't help but respond to the stimulation from the rustle and chafe of cloth against skin. And yet he didn't have the energy to even cluck his tongue in distress.

The sheer shorts plastered to his nether regions were already wet with precum. If the pet ring hadn't been constricting his member so tightly, it would have been a lot worse. Removing the last button and the final layer, Cal's handiwork elicited little shame in all his efficiency and speed. The furniture only did what the furniture had to.

Cal said, "Shall I bring a change of clothes?" He posed the question to Iason, not Riki.

"Tomorrow would be fine," Iason answered coolly.

The implicit meaning clear, Riki's smoldering animalistic lusts burst into a small conflagration.

"I understand," Cal said.

Observing Cal's deep bow out of the corner of his eyes, Riki licked his lips apprehensively.

That son-of-a-bitch Iason, I can't believe—

As Raoul returned to his residence after the cotillion with his pet, Elisha, he heaved a huge sigh. *He's outdone himself.*

Raoul couldn't believe the penalty for Riki's bad manners at the cotillion. He didn't care about the penalty itself, but the aftermath. As far as he was concerned, this business with the returner was a scandal without precedence. It was madness.

The last time Iason had brought the slum mongrel to Eos had whipped up a small hurricane. This time, it was a different, more dangerous natural disaster. The physically and mentally immature pets were being exposed to the dangerous sexuality cast off by the vicious Riki. It was like exposing them to radiation.

To the eyes of those elites who had known Riki previously, this was a remarkable turn of events. Even forgetting that Riki had been released back into the slums without an activated pet ring, the serious state of his unthinkable "returner" status was undeniable.

Once known as "vulgar and insubordinate," Riki now showed a newly found maturity. In Eos, where young pets were cycled through on an endless loop, this change in Riki was an utter astonishment.

Raoul, seeing Riki again after a year and a half, also found himself looking at the mongrel long and hard. Those three years Riki had been reared in Eos had, for good or ill, unsettled everything. As a pet, a slum mongrel shouldn't be worth the time of day. But Riki's existence dealt a crushing blow to what the elites considered common sense.

In plain language, Riki was a hand grenade thrown into a glittering but boring scene of tranquility. For all his pretensions of purposeful rule-breaking, Iason couldn't have foreseen all of the repercussions.

"A mere pet. Settling a debt shouldn't require keeping the thing around for three whole years."

Except that, at the epicenter of the storm, Iason had been swallowed up by an unpredictable gale and torn asunder.

"It started out as a mere whimsy, but he got sucked in so deep that it surprised even me. Especially after that Mimea business. Despite being an android, Iason behaved like an ordinary human. He is incomprehensible."

If I said that I—that I loved Riki, you'd probably laugh. Wouldn't you, Raoul?

Iason had said that with a straight face, with no indication of how serious a proposition he was making. It was a confession Raoul couldn't put out of his mind. Even after so much time, it was nestled inexorably in the back of his thoughts.

Returning Riki to the slums without deleting his pet registration, and then bringing him *back* to Eos to live—well, it wasn't as if the Blondies had been silent on the matter.

However, as Iason wove his logic through every loophole in the fabric of Pet Law and twisted the truth to suit his purposes, nobody stopped him, even though they raised many objections and eyebrows. But Jupiter itself clearly stated that, technically, no law had been violated.

Without exposing any weakness, Iason had been fully prepared to twist logic to his own advantage. In the end, his cleverness had triumphed. It was hard to come to any other conclusion, and not a few found themselves reacting in ways they couldn't comprehend by reason alone.

But the fact remained that the Blondies couldn't contain their curiosity. What kind of chain reaction would Riki trigger this time after his absence from Eos? Inquisitiveness and a spirit of adventure were qualities bred into the Blondies. Navigating endless labyrinths and solving incomprehensible puzzles—it was more than a lust for knowledge, it was the substance of their existences, eternally etched onto their minds.

Orphe had no scruples about calling Riki a creature with powerfully infectious capabilities. But exacting a "returner's penalty" was itself done with the expectation that Iason would use it to stir up the pot somehow.

Iason had already delayed Riki's coming-out, so the penalty seemed necessary. Orphe was in charge of Eos. His terms and stipulations were non-negotiable. Common practice was to attend the cotillion two weeks after presenting the new pet to the public. Nobody had ever delayed that schedule before.

What Iason had done was an exception to every rule in the book. Dressing Riki in black leathers seemed deliberately designed to provoke Orphe, though that might have constituted an act of revenge on Iason's part.

Still, Riki looking so good was what made the repercussions so bad. Search all over Eos and there wasn't another pet so finely built anywhere. If Orphe could say what was on his mind, a rough stone still being formed had been ground and polished and Riki was ripe and aglow with emerging adulthood.

During the latter half of Riki's three years at Eos, he had lost that poisonous air that had been so interesting. Perhaps the mongrel had been declawed. Though the "Daryl Incident" had in a single breath reversed that assessment.

A pet had shaken off the security details and made it outside Eos. Nobody could have anticipated such a thing. It was a staggering turn of events. Riki wasn't so much a "mongrel" as a wild beast.

There was no breaking it, no currying favor with it, no teaching it. Which was why Iason had no choice but to hobble it. No matter what, he was going to make this rare but adorable animal heel.

A year and a half had passed since then.

The results of removing the pet ring and giving it a breather were truly staggering. If Raoul thought so, the other Blondies certainly did as well. *A mature adult is a human being.* As simple as that seemed, it had never occurred to the residents of Eos.

Riki was the test case that proved the point.

In Eos, common sense had dictated that pets must not be adults. Sex dolls were indicators of social class, merely disposable goods.

Pursuing the next new thing was the only real excitement in Eos.

But Riki's existence had aroused in them the possibility that doing so was *not* the only way. Riki had shattered the very linchpin of reason in Eos. It wasn't just the merry-go-round of obtaining one new pet after another that could keep the buzz alive.

Riki had plunged a red-hot dagger through the perspective of the elites and the supposed allure of the never-aging body—beyond maturity and immaturity, beyond aging, decay, and degeneration.

"I trained a slum mongrel with no controls or imprinting to sit at my feet. Three years, Raoul. *It took three years.* Do you think I'm just going to cast it aside?"

Seeing the returning Riki, for the first time Raoul had the feeling that he understood the real meaning behind those words. At the cotillion, he had caught a glimpse.

There was no mystery why Riki hadn't touched any of the drinks inside the cage. *What idiot drinks knowing it's drugged?* Exactly. Riki would have wanted to permanently erase the shame of the last time from his mind.

Gideon's "violation of the rules" objections had been prompted less by any discontent with the night's fun than by his righteous indignation over the star performer refusing to rise to the occasion after all the groundwork had been so carefully laid. Questioning the effectiveness of the D-type ring had likely been a deliberate ploy rather than an innocent inquiry.

There was no way Gideon could let the chance pass. If it came down to a battle of wits—calling black white and white black—he could certainly hold his own.

But Iason had opted out. He had twisted logic with logic, answered mockery with mockery, ducking and weaving, slippery as an eel, and, at the last moment, pulling an ace from his sleeve. Without laying a finger on Riki's body, but with a slight tweak to the ring on his finger, Iason had demonstrated the powerful capabilities of the D-type ring.

Riki's transformation had been obvious. But the end result had drawn attention and curiosity to the features and functions of the nano-technology crammed into that small ring, instead of Riki.

But then, in reaction to the naked fury in Riki's eyes cutting through the row of Blondies, Iason reducing him to a crumpled heap, telling him, *This is the penalty for your bad manners*. It had abruptly changed the mood of the party.

The pets, keeping their distance but watching rapturously, couldn't have possibly understood what was going on. In exchange for the heated slanders hurled at the Blondies, Riki was turned into a gasping, clenching heap of quivering limbs. But he didn't appear so much unsightly as bizarrely and bewitchingly beautiful.

Four and a half years before he'd been an unbroken cur, a sideshow exhibition at a carnival. Now, he was different.

Pets were love toys who couldn't deny their own pleasures. They were bred and selected for that purpose, the allure of their own lasciviousness etched into their genes. Being given a name instead of a serial number was a pet's greatest honor. And to ramp up the bliss all the more, they drank in pleasure.

They couldn't keep themselves from devouring that pleasure. Nothing would be denied them in that regard. Cooing with every new sensation, stimulating themselves more and more, drowning in dissipation and gratification, every ounce of shamelessness was driven from them.

Kissing, masturbating together, exposing their private parts. Not come-ons intended to tempt, but a signal of their willingness to indulge. Displaying their erogenous zones for mutual pleasure.

Going down on pert, hard cocks. Lapping at sweet, soft clits. Licking and sucking. It was the root of joy for males and females. The evidence of their liaisons left behind on the skin was proof of a pet's superiority or inferiority. The reason for which it was born.

But not Riki. He didn't expose himself in front of crowds. He furrowed his brow and kept his exultations to himself. He openly

repudiated the "virtues" that a good pet should display. He may have been bound by the same chains as all the other pets, but he made it clear that he would not carry the same stain.

That was his unimpeachable pride as a slum mongrel.

Yet whatever was brought forth within Riki was intensely erotic, overflowing with sweet honey. The breaths spilling intermittently from the corners of his clenched mouth were as lewd as anything the other pets could do. If that wasn't sex, then nothing was.

Riki was not at all like the other newcomers, panting and flaring their nostrils. This rapturously glowing stoicism was something that neither the pets nor the Blondies had ever witnessed before.

Though the "penalty for his bad manners" lasted no more than ten minutes, Riki's secret, powerful venom had surely infected the rest of the pets.

One flushed to the tips of her ears and continuously licked her lips. Another stared at Riki, eyes watering, as if to devour every drop of shameful lasciviousness. Others paired up and openly rubbed their genitals together.

That powerfully infectious agent Orphe spoke of had only intensified. However, the true nature and meaning of its poisonous impact would only be revealed later.

Tormented by those pleasurable pulses, driven to his wit's end and driven to exhaustion—when he was released from the "penalty," Riki's shoulders heaved, his chest rose and fell with each ragged breath, and he seemed incapable of moving a step.

Sweat trickled down Riki's back. His black hair was plastered to his brow. His lips cracked open and trembled with each exhalation. His heart thumped inside his chest, his blood pounded at his temples, drowning out the clamor around him.

"Come on, Riki," Jason said.

But Riki just stood there and stared.

"*Riki!*" Iason said again, though his voice was coaxing.

Riki suddenly came to his senses. He slowly opened his watering eyes. Doing his best to calm his still trembling limbs, he clumsily got to his feet.

"What do you know?" murmured Hubert Boma. "And I thought it was totally wild. That doesn't seem to be the case, though."

"It can sniff out such subtle distinctions in Iason's tone of voice. Just like a dog, don't you think?" Haynes Salas spoke under his breath, but his surprise was evident.

To the pets, as the Blondies tossed off such harsh remarks, the words came across as arrogant and overbearing. But in fact, it was more a matter of Riki precisely ascertaining the degree of Iason's wrath.

How far the safety zone went—how far into the red zone he could go—thanks to Iason's training, Riki could grasp where those lines were drawn just from the tone of Iason's voice. And now, Raoul and the others had caught a glimpse of the true quintessence—however perverse it might be—of this demigod.

But they soon realized as well that this little show was nothing more than a preface to the real performances to come.

Like an exhausted fish reeled in at the end of a line, Riki slumped over, on the verge of collapsing in a heap. The pitiful, ugly, wretched sight went completely unremarked upon. Everybody held their breaths, eyes fixed on the scene, wondering what would happen after this and how the play would end.

Iason took Riki by his hair and jerked his head up. "All this exertion must have left you quite dry."

Riki only gasped for breath.

"Want a drink?" Iason said, as if offering him a prize.

The beverages arrayed on the table next to the mouth-watering hors d'oeuvres were the finest anywhere, made to fit the cravings of any

pet. But not Riki.

"Water—"

Raoul was a bit taken aback that Riki would settle for mere water. Iason had made him crawl, but he wouldn't fawn. He'd hold his own, obstinate to the end. More than a trait of the slum mongrel, Raoul had begun to gather, this was a manifestation of Riki's pride. It would not crumble despite being steeped in a poisonous pet miasma.

Perhaps anticipating this reaction, a small smile came to Iason's lips. *Even now you cannot be coaxed to let it go.* A glimmer of Iason's true nature was showing as well. A Blondy and a slum mongrel. A master and his pet.

There is something going on between Iason and Riki that can't be put into words. But Raoul had dismissed the outrageous thought as soon as it flashed through his mind.

Riki's reward for enduring the penalty was soon provided in the form of mineral water. Except that the exhausted Riki didn't even have the energy to hold a glass. When Iason passed him one, it soon crashed to the floor. But Iason didn't criticize the blunder. Far from it, he effortlessly hauled Riki into his lap, filled another glass, took a drink, and then pressed his lips to Riki's.

Everybody gulped in unison at the unbelievable sight. Nothing of the sort had ever been seen before. A moment of silence passed, and then a loud uproar erupted.

At a formal cotillion, a pet couldn't eat except what was offered to him. That being the case, giving a pet a drink of water mouth-to-mouth seemed like a violation of etiquette. But actually, it wasn't. It was just that no master would contemplate such a thing.

Pets were to be loved and admired from a distance, not up close and physically. The shock of watching convention turned upside down shook the pets as if by an earthquake, and struck Raoul and the rest of the Blondies dumb with surprise.

Iason didn't do it once, but twice, and then a third time. As long as Riki wished for more, he would provide it, shutting out the expressions of shock and the clamorous voices around them.

That son of a bitch Iason is pulling shit like that on purpose and loving every minute of it, Raoul thought, pulling a sour face. He sat down heavily on the sofa in his residence.

Up until now, Riki being Iason's pet had been widely acknowledged. The specifics of that relationship, though, had been kept under wraps. The only evidence that Iason was taking Riki to bed was the love marks that appeared on Riki's body.

Whatever the truth was, the stark reality hadn't really hit home. The hickeys marking Iason's possession remained on Riki's skin. That simple fact was enough to cause a fuss. *A master sleeping with a pet—and a slum morigrel at that.* It was a scandal of unprecedented proportions. A perverse disgrace to the Blondy name.

Though Iason's predilections were never shown in public, the gossip filled every corner of Eos. Before, no matter how scandalous the rumor became, Iason was sure to neither confirm nor deny. He ignored them.

But now things were different. They'd been deliberately shown a small slice of his relationship with the returner, but it was as subtle as a belch of black smoke. And yet, Iason still would not reveal his hand.

What the hell does Iason intend to do?

Raoul furrowed his brow again in fierce irritation.

The fires of raw lust scorching Riki's innards, he was dragged into another room of Iason's residence. Still naked, his flesh was all but on fire.

Behind him, a chime sounded and the door closed.

Riki and Iason were alone in the room. No lingering gazes licking over him, no annoying background noise—as it registered, Riki could stop holding his breath so tightly.

He felt Iason's presence at his back, and became aware of how the mood enveloping both of them grew measurably denser. The leash was removed from the collar and the slight movement caused his hair to stand on end. But Iason remained quiet as always to the change he knew Riki was experiencing.

Not all absolute dictators lorded over their subjects with such arrogance. But a normally loquacious man lapsing into sullen silence was all the more off-putting.

Without speaking, Iason stood in front of Riki and laced his fingers through the black hair plastered against the nape of Riki's neck, lifting it up. Moving softly to the left and right, with a relaxed deliberateness, he undid the collar. The damp hair was in the way. That was all. But it somehow seemed meaningful or important. And that was a mistake.

Shit. Riki swore to himself. He sensed that there, hovering over him, Iason was purposefully smiling. Everything inside was coming out. More than being defeated so handily, for some reason, a kind of bashfulness was coming to the fore. Something that had been crushed out of him so long ago.

Shit. Shit. Shit!

The cotillion should have gouged out the remaining shards of shame. There wasn't anything left to reveal. But standing before the fully clothed Iason, Riki was overcome by uncertainty because Iason could plainly see his aroused state.

Riki could have snubbed the close attentions of anybody else. But not Iason's gaze. Iason's supple, graceful fingers removed the collar. Even without the belt constricting Riki's throat, the harshness of each drawn breath did not diminish.

Riki had begun to grasp what that meant. And yet, able to do nothing but clamp his mouth closed all the harder in order to

smother that realization, he grew increasingly irritated with himself. He might flounder and writhe and shout vulgarities, but in the end, Jason could make him do anything, sing how he pleased. And Riki hated that.

Jason's hand suddenly caressed Riki's chest. "My, but your nipples are hard."

Riki jerked his shoulders and swallowed a scream. But the surprise attack overcame his defenses. Jason laced his fingers through the hair lying against Riki's neck and took a tight hold. He would not permit Riki to endure such pleasures with his face hidden.

All the way from the cotillion to their home, no matter how hard Riki tried to cool the heat between his thighs, the unceasing inner stimulations confessed themselves in the hard nubs of his nipples. The friction of his clothing alone became painful.

"It's as if they're crying out to be fondled," Jason said.

You think? Riki wished to curse at Jason, and much more abuse besides that. But with his hair in Jason's grasp, his throat bent into a bow, the poisonous words couldn't rise to his lips. Instead, his nipples stood out from his chest, peaking so tightly they hurt.

"This really is your weak spot."

Along with those words, Jason applied direct manipulation. A streak of flame flashed up Riki's neck. Exploring erogenous zones Riki hadn't known existed with both mouth and hands, and training them until the slightest touch caused an extreme reaction—that was something only Jason could do. Calling him *fucking bastard* didn't change the fact that the slightest stroke of his fingers against Riki's nipples made his mouth shake uncontrollably.

"Well, the more sensitive the better, wouldn't you say?" Jason commented as he lazily kneaded the area, making Riki's left breast burn. His heartbeat raced, as if acting in concert with every movement of Jason's fingers. Despite his clenched jaw, there was no way to hide the sweet moans and panting puffs escaping his nostrils. Hot torrents of pleasure coursed through his body, pouring

down between his legs into a bottomless reservoir.

With an almost irritating slowness, the poison circulated through his veins. His loins spasmed, the tips of his fingers grew numb, his cock sprang up. Unable to stifle his ragged breaths, Riki pinched his eyebrows together.

Suddenly, Iason pinched his nipples.

"Haa—"

Riki's sack tightened and lifted up in response, his buttocks clenching and raising slightly.

Iason whispered in his ear, "Don't let it show, now. If you can't even handle this much, I'll have to take measures so not a drop leaks out."

The sweet poison in Iason's words was many times deadlier than that seeping through Riki's system.

"Haa—haa—"

Not mere pillow talk, but a clear command. Riki pressed his remaining strength into his thighs, squeezing his balls together. Nevertheless, the precum continued to dribble out. It took all his might to keep from shooting out his release. But he needed something to cling to besides himself, and grabbed hold of Iason's clothing. If he hadn't his legs would have folded up beneath him.

"Hold still just the way you are," Iason said mercilessly, continuing to manipulate Riki's nipples.

"What—the—fuck—are—you—pissed—about—?" Seized by an indescribable unease, Riki's words quavered from between his clenched teeth and trembling lips.

"Ahh—ahh—haa—" Riki moaned helplessly on the king-size bed. He couldn't remember how many times he'd climaxed. But all the pleasure of orgasm was surrendering to a mounting sense of fatigue.

The unending bliss turned to agony. And yet, Iason wouldn't let up. Spreading Riki's legs wide, relentlessly thrusting and twisting his hips forward, incessantly boring down on his secret bud, excavating the jewels of Riki's ecstasy.

The sheets were soaked with sweat and lubricant and cum. At times like this, with Riki panting, half-suffocating, his chest heaving, Iason's placid features seemed all the more like those of some mysterious creature.

The Blondies perched at the top of the Eos power structure were the cool and collected dictators of their own beds. Of course, only Iason would have sex with a pet—only he was such an unrepentant pleasure seeker that he would put into actual use the equivalent functionality of a high-class sex android.

"Enough—already—give—it—a—break—" Riki cried out, barely able to articulate the words, but Iason was deaf to them.

In the slums, a man who boasted of the vitality to do it three times in a row never did it without chemical assistance. But not Iason. His endurance was the genuine article.



Lacking the right to refuse him, Riki knew that better than anyone.

The first time they'd had sex, Riki had assumed that the other Blondies took their pets to bed as well. But learning that Iason alone engaged in such perversions left him speechless.

When they were physically fused together, Riki couldn't fathom what was going through Iason's mind. Only that Iason would strum him like a harp until he couldn't breathe, until his body shook with lust, until the core of his brain flashed into a white-out.

Iason had always kept up a cool dialogue when they were in bed together. But now, he was unnaturally taciturn, and Riki knew this meant he was angry.

Riki could only remember two other times Iason had been so angry. Once after he'd had sex with Mimea, and then, after he'd slipped through the security perimeter at Eos and made a run for the slums.

Each time he'd paid dearly. But this time, he couldn't figure out what had set Iason off. Getting hauled in here after the coming-out party and fucked to the point of torture—if it were in Riki's rights to pose the question, he would have, and angrily.

He couldn't deny he'd run off at the mouth, digging his own grave and then digging it deeper. Riki wasn't that old a dog and he could still learn new tricks. Incessantly goading Iason served no purpose.

But unlike dragging unimaginable sensations out of Riki with his fingers and tongue, the physical burden of Iason riding him over and over, penetrating him to his deepest parts, was enormous. Too much bliss turned toxic. The exposed nerves produced not pleasure but torture.

"Ahh—"

Riki's hips lifted off the mattress, plastered to Iason's pelvis, undulating, his groin heaving.

No—no—more—to—give—

Everything Riki had left had been wrung out of him hours ago. Even raising his hoarse voice was painful. But Iason's firmness never flagged. The hardness and size penetrated Riki's tender core.

"Nothing left to give?" Iason asked, playing the ball of his thumb across Riki's honeyed mouth. "But with every thrust, a little more spills out."

Riki screamed in an agony of ecstasy. Iason penetrating him, baring his privates and pleasuring him with hand and mouth had made his flesh hypersensitive to the slightest stimulation. His limbs thrashed and his thighs shuddered in response, swallowing Iason's long shaft even deeper.

Iason smiled out of the side of his mouth. "That's not nice of you. Saying *no more* while holding me all the more tightly. You always have more to give."

The frosty Iason was never more awfully "human" than at times like this. But the unquestionably man-made substance of his body was soon driven home all over again. The cock conquering Riki from the insides suddenly grew even larger.

"Ahh—! You're—getting—bigger—!"

Riki's face convulsed shamelessly. His neck bent and his head turned backward. Already strained, any larger and he knew he would break.

That fear became a reality.

But Iason's sadism only fanned the fires of his fears. "All the better to fuck you with," he murmured, in a tone sweet enough to give Riki chills. The poisonous edge of that sweetness cut all the way down to his spine.

The quivering, erect head and honeyed mouth. His ripe and pointed flesh. Pampered and played with and then violated. Deeper and deeper into his rapt, molten innards.

Iason pounded into Riki. The skin stinging, the muscles convulsing, carving him into pieces. Pillaged and flayed alive, Riki descended into the abyss.

No. Stop. I'm going to die.

Riki could no longer comprehend the words coming out of his mouth. He knew only the scalding hot breath in his throat, a cry arising from the deepest part of his being, shaking his brain to the core.

Epilogue

How long had he been detained in the darkness? How long had he been imprisoned? How much longer would he have to wait? He didn't know. But it no longer mattered.

Kirie clutched the vermillion sphere to his chest, confirming its warmth and sharing its pulse. He was okay. He wasn't afraid. He needed nothing else as long as he held the sphere to his chest.

Because it embodied all of Kirie's hopes and dreams.

He held, hugged and kissed it. Licked, nibbled and sucked it. Again and again. And waited patiently. In time, the large, vermillion egg would hatch into the thing Kirie desired most.

Slowly, gradually, the hue and shape changed. The egg hatched and morphed. At last, a human form emerged. Lithe and naked, with black hair. The thing Kirie longed and yearned for lay before him, like an offering consecrated only to him.

Bridling his pounding heart, Kirie drew closer and sang an incantation into the human's ear. The name of the consecrated offering. His sweet and beloved—

"—*Riki*."

The closed eyelids faintly opened. The obsidian eyes, mirroring the imprisoning darkness and brimming with moist heat, looked up at Kirie.

"Riki—"

Again, Kirie murmured the name and kissed him reverently. When he did, Riki stroked his hair. Taking that as a sign, Kirie kissed him more ardently.

Riki— Riki—

The feast had only just begun. There was no telling when it would

end.

Afterword

Hello there.

This summer hasn't simply been *hot*. It's been *stifling*.

I had to crank up the air conditioner to full blast from noon on to prevent heat stroke and keep my brain from melting. It was a great relief when October rolled around and the evenings again became pleasantly cool.

For the time being, though, I'm still in short sleeves during the day. I think my body temperature may be adjusting as well.

This has been volume six of *Ai no Kusabi*.

Well, what to make of that? At about this point, I'm not exactly taking my time and treading water (wiping away the flop sweat). I hadn't anticipated that the scenes that poured out of my pen into the hardcover edition would end up taking so many pages (picture me getting that distant look in my eyes).

As a result, the second half will show up in the next volume. In any case, it probably came down to me personally wanting to read closely through the parts I'd breezed through previously.

About this point in the hardcover edition, the story makes a beeline for the big climax. The state of affairs in Eos, and the names and characters of any of the Blondies except Iason and Raoul, go unmentioned. Obsessing over a missed last chance at a rewrite is a bad habit of mine.

So how was *Metamorphose*? I hope you enjoyed it.

Now, to change the subject. As a special treat to myself, the first in a new drama CD series, *Ai no Kusabi I*, will debut in May. As usual,

it's a double CD set. Unlike the paperback, the plan is to follow the time-line up to the final volume. The first installment begins with Iason and Riki's fateful first encounter, as described in "Destiny." The script for the "Kusabi" series will be included.

The cast is as follows:

Riki.....Itou Kentarou

Iason.....Oogawa Tooru

Katze.....Miki Shin'ichirou

Raoul.....Kuroda Takaya

Guy.....Toriurni Kousuke

Alec.....Terasoma Masaki

The next installment in the *Kusabi* series will cover the three years Riki spent as a pet in greater depth. But even there, I can't help looking forward to the differences that sound and print bring to the "before" and "after" of the cotillion in volume six. I'm hoping you'll enjoy it. I'll give it my best shot!

Ah, yes. In September, the final volume of Lucifer and Michael's heavenly romance, *Seal of Darkness II: Daybreak*, will be released. Please indulge yourself.

In any case, you can always go to www.mee-maker.com for more details. Mail orders aside, check out the good people at Animate. And incidentally, we're currently up to the fifth installment of my "special treat to myself" series.

Oh, yes. In September, *Kusare'en no Housoku V* from Kadokawa's Ruby imprint will be coming out, along with the *Silver Requiem*

reissue in the "M" series from Nihon Bungeisha Karen Paperbacks (what in the world does "M" stand for anyway?) The illustrator is Kojima Fumie, so the Ruby version will have a different look and feel to it.

These originated as drama CD treatments I wrote for *June* (though that doesn't mean any of my younger readers will have heard of it... ah, I'm showing my age). I doubt many people are aware of that, but these are pretty good drama CDs, if I do say so myself.

Back when I got it into my head to create my own drama CDs as a reward to myself, my slogan was, "The quality of *Silver Requiem* is the gold standard." If anybody's interested, give one of these CDs a listen. The accompanying booklet is formatted like an art book and is entrancingly beautiful. The mail order address is printed at the end of the book.

Good heavens, right up to the very end I've been talking up stuff I've published elsewhere! I apologize to the good people at Seibidou Publishing. I promise to do my best in the next volume!

Rieko Yoshihara

October 2007